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The Gift of Music

BY LUCY LEWIS

Familiar sounds echo down the narrow hallway as I walk toward the music room with a line of kids with their violin cases trailing behind me. As we reach the open doorway, I am greeted by the sight of a phenomenal woman, Roberta Guaspari, working with a group of intermediate violin students, and am once again impressed with her tenacity and drive for excellence. As I watch, I silently wonder to myself, *How could I have ever considered not being a music teacher?*

When Carla Trynchuk, my violin professor at Andrews University, asked me whether or not I wanted to do my student teaching with Roberta Guaspari in Harlem, my first response was, “Are you serious?” followed by a very quick, “Yes!”

Featured in the film, *Music of the Heart* (starring Meryl Streep), Roberta is a woman who has dedicated her life to sharing the gift of music with thousands of children in Harlem. Her determination and perseverance are remarkable considering she came to New York City all by herself with two small children to raise and no job. She convinced a few schools in Harlem to let her start a violin program, but ten years later, when budget cuts were being made, the violin program was at the top of the list to go. Roberta decided to put up a fight, and long story short, several influential musicians, including Arnold Steinhardt, Itzhak Perlman and Isaac Stern helped to arrange a fund-raising concert (“Fiddlefest”) at Carnegie Hall where they played alongside her students. This incredible, sold-out performance won Roberta international recognition, and the proceeds more than covered the costs of the violin program for the upcoming school year.

Today, programs in six different New York City public schools offer violin, viola and cello lessons to more than 500 students per year. Additionally, in 2003, the Opus 118 Harlem School of Music was founded to provide after-school music lessons and dynamic group classes for both children and adults.

Learning to live in Harlem after growing up in Berrien Springs has been a bit of a culture shock and a challenge to be sure, but as I walk each day in this multifaceted city I have learned to love the “Big Apple,” the subways, the people, and especially the children. It has been a unique privilege to be mentored by Roberta. Each day I am learning more about how to teach children excellence, discipline and perseverance through playing the violin. For some of the children, music will be the tool that takes them out of an “at-risk” lifestyle and allows them to consider options that would not otherwise have been possible.

Working with these precious children has been a humbling experience, and my daily prayer has become the words to the second stanza of the hymn, “O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee”:

Help me the slow of heart to move

By some clear, winning word of love;

Teach me the wayward feet to stay,

And guide them in the homeward way.

I began the semester not quite sure if “teaching was for me,” and am finishing knowing that there is nothing else I would rather do.

Lucy Lewis is a senior at Andrews University completing her degree in music education.

In May 2007 she graduated with degrees in violin performance and Spanish with a minor in bilingual education. For more information about the Opus 118 Harlem School of Music, go to www.opus118.org.

