

by Ethan Cruikshank

Music to My Ears

I close my eyes. No longer am I reading from my sheet of music, or even thinking about the individual notes. Instead, I am letting the music flow through my body. This is the feeling I want to share with others.

My music education began when I was seven years old. Honestly, I can't remember why I begged my mom to take lessons, but once I started, I wanted to be like Beethoven. After all, he was an incredibly accomplished musician. My instrument of choice, however, was the guitar.

Following weekly lessons, I enthusiastically practiced each new song. From rock, blues, and classical to hip hop and rap, the sheer diversity of music styles amazed me. After playing for a few years, though, I felt that something was missing. I wanted more than to attend lessons once a week, practice, and play for my grandparents.

I wanted to know as much about music as I could, and decided that learning to play another instrument would help. So in fifth grade, in addition to guitar lessons, I began taking viola lessons in the strings program at school. The viola seemed more exotic than the violin and cello that so many kids played, and I liked its sound. Learning the viola gave me a greater appreciation for classical music and style, and ultimately helped me realize that classical guitar was my passion.

At the end of that year, however, budget cuts forced our county to eliminate the music program from the elementary school curriculum. For years, that program had given children the opportunity to play a musical instrument or sing in the choir. My brother and I had enjoyed and benefited from this program, and so had many of our friends, some of whom had gone on to join band or strings class in middle school. I felt bad that the younger children at my school wouldn't have this opportunity. On a larger scale, the trend toward eliminating arts programs in U.S. schools meant that increasingly fewer children would have access to music programs. I wanted to do something that would help keep music education alive for some of them.

Filling the Gap

If the school could no longer teach kids to play an instrument, maybe I could. After four years of guitar lessons, I knew I could teach younger kids using the techniques my teacher used with me, but I quickly realized that I couldn't work with all the students who might benefit. The removal of the instrument program would affect nearly 400 students each year. I wondered if my musician friends would help, and asked if they were willing to commit to teaching students in their homes. The response was extremely positive. Everyone was excited at the opportunity to share their musical talent and help other kids enjoy the experience of playing music.

Once I had commitments from seven "teachers," I began recruiting students through mailbox flyers and ads in our community newsletter. That first year, my friends and I provided free weekly guitar, piano, and violin lessons to 13 elementary school students. That's how, when I was 10 years old, I founded the community service organization Music To My Ears.

Becoming a Musical Ambassador

I had volunteered before, but starting my own project was something else entirely. I had to outline my goals and mission, recruit teachers and students, and determine how to match them. I had to figure out how to make my ideas work over the long term, and I needed skills that would help me accomplish these tasks.

Fortunately, as a Davidson Young Scholar, I was eligible to apply for the Davidson Young Scholars Ambassadors program, which provides Young Scholars with the tools to make a positive difference in the lives of others through community service, volunteerism, and leadership.

I submitted an application outlining my ideas for expanding Music To My Ears and was ultimately selected to participate in the 18-month program in which students design, build, and manage their own service program. Included in the training are eight one-week online seminars covering such topics as strategic business planning, philanthropy, and interpersonal communication, as well as classes in self-advocacy, fundraising, and public/media relations. I was also assigned a program advisor to provide expert guidance and training.



Awards and Accolades

Through the Ambassadors program, I honed my communication and leadership skills and learned not to be afraid to ask people for help. As a result, my project thrived. Now in its fourth year, Music To My Ears has provided 70 children with lessons from 21 teachers, who have given over 1,000 hours of service to our communities. This year, we have 11 teachers offering instruction in flute, harp, guitar, piano, saxophone, and violin.

Knowledge of the program has spread widely in my community and through other organizations I am affiliated with, including The Davidson Institute and Kids Are Heroes, an organization that encourages children to become leaders in their communities through service. Music To My Ears has expanded to include teachers and students whom I have not personally recruited, who learned about the program through word of mouth.

I have been fortunate to receive many accolades for my work with Music To My Ears. This recognition has given me a platform, both locally and nationally, on which to speak about the importance of music education and youth volunteerism. Last year, through my Davidson Institute and Kids Are Heroes peer contacts, I started a chapter of Music To My Ears in Maryland. Another peer is forming a chapter in Texas. I've also created a website with information on how musicians can start their own chapter.

This experience has shown me that passion is truly what you make of it: Through the support I received as a Davidson Ambassador, I've been able to transform my own love of music into an opportunity to help others experience music, too. **i**



Ethan Cruikshank is a freshman at Maggie L. Walker Governor's School for Government and International Studies in Richmond, VA. He was named 2011 Prudential Spirit of Community Middle Level Virginia State winner for his work with Music To My Ears, and has received two Presidential Volunteer Service Awards,

a Virginia State Senate Commendation, and a State of Maryland Governor's Citation. He is vice president of his 4-H Club, as well as a member of his school's academic team. Ethan enjoys playing volleyball for his school, and basketball for himself.

Learn more about Music To My Ears at www.musictoyearshanover.org.
Learn more about Davidson Young Scholars at www.davidsongifted.org/youngscholars.