



DRUMBEAT FOR A DREAM

by Barbara A. Chaapel

When Don Liuzzi, principal timpanist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, rolls his drumsticks over the head of the great kettle drum, the small boys in the first row of chairs in the gym of the White Rock Baptist Church open their eyes as wide as full moons. It's a good bet they have never seen timpani before, especially from two-feet away.

Which is exactly why Jay Gardner, associate pastor of White Rock and a 2000 PTS grad, invited the orchestra's percussion section to the church's after-school program.

"The kids in the West Philadelphia schools come from a low-income part of town," says Gardner. "They have little exposure to classical music or art. I want to expose them to the things kids in the suburbs get routinely, like the arts and science."

So Gardner called the orchestra. He discovered they had a grant program to take music to the schools and would be happy to send their musicians, one section at a time on four winter afternoons, to White Rock.

While the musicians set up drums, marimbas, and gongs at one end of the gym, Gardner gathers 15 kids in a circle at the other.

"Who wants to share one good thing or one bad thing that happened today?" he asks the kids as they grasp hands, cocking their heads toward the staccato warm-up of snares. "I learned about Martin Luther King," sings out one girl. "I went to a dumb party at school," offers another.

After the circle of sharing, the kids pair off with volunteer adult "reading buddies" who help them with homework at nearby tables. The tutoring is an important element of the three-day-a-week program Gardner started soon after he joined the staff.

"I came to White Rock with the idea of starting a program for the neighborhood kids," he says. "There's already an Exodus to Excellence program, related to Temple and Drexel Universities, that's for junior and senior highs. I wanted to do something with elementary kids, and to partner the schools with a faith organization. As a church, I felt we should take the initiative."

So he met with the Family Resource Center of the School District of Philadelphia and found that the Samuel Huey Elementary School was within walking distance of the church. "It was the perfect way to start," he says, "with kids in our own neighborhood. There are about 18 kids in the program; they're not members of the church, and that's not our goal. We're not here to preach or to proselytize, just to show Christ's love by our actions. God will do the rest."

The program kicked off in the spring of 2002 and is now in its third semester. A few parents of the after-school kids have shown some interest in joining the church, and this year, the church kids invited the after-school kids to their Christmas party.

Gardner, who received the David B. Watermulder Prize in Church Leadership from PTS in 2000, wishes the numbers were bigger, and admits it takes lots of energy and patience to keep the momentum going. "It's not like a biology or chemistry experiment, where you mix things up and it works," says the former chemist. "This takes time."

What motivates him? "I like kids," he says. "When I was a boy in Michigan I had opportunities through my schools to hear music, do science experiments, go to museums. I want the same for these kids."

The five percussionists are ready and the kids move to the rows of chairs facing the instruments. "Did you know that all of these instruments are made of wood, metal, or skin?" Luizzi asks the kids, inviting them up to touch the drumheads. "This one is made of skin and it still has some hair on it!"

The musicians play a Gainsborough piece featuring the xylophone and the bass drum. The kids tap their feet and gape, transfixed. Next is a Puerto Rican selection for bongos, followed by a composition featuring the steel drums. "With percussion instruments, you have to create a beat," explains Luizzi, teaching the kids to tap out duples and triples. "It's like imagining a big oak tree walking down the street and dropping acorns along the way every few steps," he says as they beat their feet and clap.

Luizzi passes out triangles, maracas, and wood blocks and invites the kids to join the orchestra. There are smiles all around. At the end, the kids help the musicians pack up their instruments.

Weeks later, Gardner will take the kids to a concert downtown at the Kimmel Center, where the orchestra performs for the public, hoping the experience will forge a bond that will last a lifetime.

He's already arranging to bring staff from the city's Academy of Natural Sciences to White Rock, and inviting church members who are scientists to do experiments with the kids. Congregants are proud of the program, though admit to initially wondering "What is Jay doing?"

"He's dreaming," says Earlene Satterfield, a retired Philadelphia school administrator and member of White Rock who assists Gardner. "We're the volunteers. Jay is the one who has the dream." ■



Jay Gardner



White Rock kids join the percussion section of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Photos: Joshua Sutherland

