

Music moves youth helped by Community Women Against Hardship

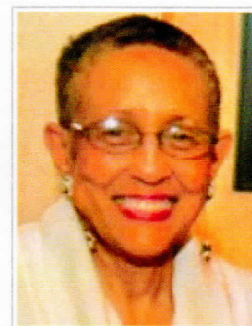
By Terry Perkins, Special to the Beacon

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It's a glorious, golden Saturday afternoon in early October in St. Louis. Forest Park is crowded with people visiting the Zoo, and it seems like a perfect day to be outside and enjoy the spectacular weather.

On Belle Place, off Vandeventer Avenue a few blocks west and north of Grand Center and the Fox, Sheldon and Jazz at the Bistro, the entertainment is furnished by competing garage sales. But inside a white building on the north side of the street, at least three activities are happening all at once in the home of the nonprofit organization, Community Women Against Hardship.

In one room, a group of parents and kids have just completed doing exercises and are settling in to watch a video on nutrition for families. It's just one of many programs Gloria Taylor (right), the director of CWAH, has worked hard to put in place to help families in need – especially women and children who face abusive situations.



At the same time at the front of the building, Taylor is rapidly matching up checks and credit card receipts for tickets to the annual CWAH Circle of Support Gala Benefit Concert and Auction at the Sheldon Concert Hall Oct. 16.

Simultaneously, in a large room with a small stage on the opposite side of the hall from the people watching the nutrition video, drummer Jerome Harris, pianist Brad Ellebrecht and saxophonist Hope Walker work on instructing several teenagers on percussion, sax and ensemble playing. In nearby rooms, guitarist Eric Slaughter and multi-instrumentalist Jeff Anderson conduct one-on-one sessions with a couple more young students.

The music instruction is part of a CWAH project called The Institute For the Advancement of Jazz Study and Performance, and it takes place here

every Saturday during the school year when classes are in session. "We started the institute in 2005," Taylor says as we sit in her office, surrounded by piles of paperwork; photos of past events and proclamations and awards lining the walls. "But I can't really take the credit. The institute was actually always Jerome's dream."

Harris, whom I caught up with after the instruction period with students had wrapped up, started his musical career in high school in the mid-1950s. Since then, he's played with practically every major musician who has come out of the St. Louis area to gain national prominence, including Oliver Jake, John Hicks and Lester Bowie. Harris has also worked with other nationally and internationally known musicians such as Eddie Harris, Regina Carter, Claude "Fiddler" Williams, Bobby Timmons, Eddie Harris others.

After catching up on paperwork after the lessons while the students watched jazz videos presented by Roscoe Crenshaw and listened to him talk about jazz history, Harris explains how the Institute for the Advancement of Jazz Study and Performance got its start.

"I got to know Gloria because of the great work she was doing with CWAH," says Harris. "And she was always a music fan as well – especially of jazz – so I would see her at concerts and performances. It had always been in my mind to try and do something in terms of communicating and teaching



PHOTO BY TERRY PERKINS

Jerome Harris talks with students on a recent Saturday.

CWAH CIRCLE OF SUPPORT GALA

Community Women Against Hardship's annual major fundraiser will be at 5 p.m. Oct. 16 at the Sheldon Concert Hall.

The Circle of Support Gala will feature a concert by the Los Angeles-based jazz group, Jazz In Pink, as well as an auction of donated items.

music to younger generations, so one day I brought up my ideas to Gloria. And she was very enthusiastic and supportive. We decided to try and set up a jazz study program at CWAH."

Initially, Harris wanted to name the program the Miles Davis Institute as a way to connect the metro area's most famous musician with young musical students. But discussions with the Davis estate ran into negotiations with lawyers, so eventually, Harris and Taylor decided to go without the link to the Davis name for the institute.

"We decided to proceed on our own," says Harris, and it didn't take too long to get a donation of some instruments from the non-profit group, Music For Lifelong Achievement, based at the Sheldon. We started up for a trial period in 2005, and had students come in after school."

But Harris and Taylor soon realized that students' conflicts with many other school-related and social activities made it difficult for them to get to the institute on a regular basis in late afternoons during the week. And the program switched to providing music lessons on late Saturday morning – first on a bi-weekly basis.

Thanks to a recent grant, the program takes place every Saturday during the school year from the September after labor Day through late May. The only exceptions are during school holidays – and when snow and ice close the city schools.

All proceeds will go to benefit CWAH programs.

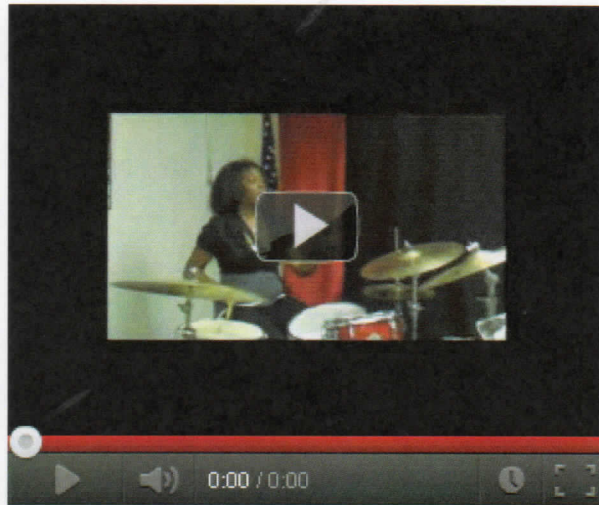
Jazz In Pink, an all-female septet, features flutist Althea Rene, who was a member of the Detroit-based group, Straight Ahead, which performed at several previous CWAH Galas.

Tickets range from \$100 (which includes a post-concert reception with the musicians) to \$25.

You can purchase tickets through www.metrotix.com (314-534-1111) or through [CWAH](#).

STUDENTS TALK ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

"There are still conflicts with other extracurricular school activities," says Taylor, who has come in to collect his paperwork. "But expanding the program from every other Saturday during the school year to every Saturday has really helped give the program more cohesiveness from the point of view of both the students and the teachers."



The regular sessions have helped the Institute increase outside performances by the students. A combo recently performed as the opening act for the Jazz Edge Big Band at the Ethical Society, and several of the young musicians at a CWAH fund-raiser at Jazz at the Bistro sat in with Harris and other professional musicians on stage.

"Having the students play outside events is very important to them – whether they choose to go on with their musical training and become professional musicians or not," says Harris. "It's that kind of exposure that builds their confidence in themselves as people – not just in their musical ability."

It's a philosophy that Taylor also shares – and one that she tries to use in exposing the children in the families that CWAH serves to other art forms such as theater in conjunction with the Black Repertory Theater, as well as through free classes at CWAH in painting, print making, video documentary and more.

"Music education has been proven time and time again to help students learn in other areas such as math and sciences and writing," Taylor says. "And unfortunately, basic music education is not being taught the way it should be in schools. Many of these students may not go on to become professional musicians, but it provides a wonderful help to them. In addition to helping them learn in general, it teaches them that you can learn about more than just one thing. And that's so important."

Harris nods in agreement. Taylor pauses, looks at the empty room with the drums, piano and other instruments on stage, then adds one final thought.

"I've been working with CWAH for 23 years," she says. "And it's all about one word – hope. It's about giving that back to people who need that. And it's something you can pass on ... and keep alive."

To find out more about CWAH, or to find out how to enroll a student in the Institute for the Advancement of Jazz Study and Development, visit www.cwah.org , or call 314-289-7523.



PHOTO BY TERRY PERKINS

Hope Walker works one-on-one with a student.

Terry Perkins is a freelance writer who frequently writes on music. To reach him, contact Beacon features and commentary editor [Donna Korando](#).

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