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'No culture of donating big money to music organizations'

By Hanan Daqqa / Fairfax County Times Dec 21, 2018



AYPO is a youth orchestra program that has been on the scene for 54 years and was the 2018 ARTSFAIRFAX Arts Education Award winner. The organization leaders ask: "There is Strathmore; there is the Kennedy Center; why doesn't Virginia have something?"

PHOTO BY NESHAN NALTCHAYAN

AYPO is a youth orchestra program that has been taking gifted students one rung further up the ladder for 54 years now. They believe it is time for corporations headquartered in the County to support the creation of a venue suitable for their rehearsal and performance needs.

What is AYPO?

In addition to being a concert-giving organization, American Youth Philharmonic Orchestras (AYPO) is most importantly an educational one, according to Dr. Graham Elliott, the executive director of AYPO. The organization was awarded the Arts Education Award by ARTS FAIRFAX in October this year.

“We’re one of the longest established youth orchestra programs in the country, not just around here. Frankly, though I’m always a bit hesitant as a British native to blow the trumpet of the AYPO, the reality is that if you explore around the country, you’ll find alumni all over the place in some of the finest top orchestras and a lot of awareness that the standard here is rather exceptional,” said Dr. Elliott. “AYPO’s top orchestra, which was recently conducted at the Kennedy Center by Maestro Nosedá, is recognized as playing at a near-professional level. ... I think where we’re lucky here is that we have an artistic staff with exceptional ability and exceptional commitment. It’s a combination of things which makes this work.”



Dr. Graham Elliott, the executive director of AYPO: “How do we get into the boardroom of some of the big multinational old businesses that have headquarters spread all over Northern Virginia and get them to see that what we’re doing is training the creative mind of this generation and the generation after that? These programs do not just make people musicians, it make them more rounded people, more sociable people.”

PHOTO COURTESY AYPO



Music Buddies students are individually coached by some of AYPO's senior students. There is no fee charged for students who come to Music Buddies.

PHOTO COURTESY AYPO

Acceptance into AYPO and Music Buddies

Even though acceptance into AYPO is through audition, they accept students with different levels, starting at a relatively more humble stage with two string orchestras. AYPO has 470 students in five orchestras and six instrumental ensembles. "In addition to that, we run a very successful outreach program, which is called Music Buddies, which is specifically for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds who might never otherwise discover that they got some sort of talent and they are individually coached by some of our senior students as mentors," said Dr. Elliott. There is no fee charged for the students who come to Music Buddies.

Lack of corporate involvement

When asked about the lack of public awareness of the art resources, especially in the southern part of the County, and why most the students in the Music Buddies program come from Arlington, President of the Board of Directors at AYPO Karen Leyva shared that AYPO's ultimate goal is to be able to reach out to the talented everywhere, but they need support to be able to do so. She pointed out that there is a lack of corporate involvement:

“The biggest sources of funding are of course the parents, and we have small supporters, who love the arts, but the most important thing is corporate sponsorship and this is where we are getting into the community aspect of it. Of course we apply to grants, we apply to foundations and so on, but the involvement of some of these large organizations that we have here that are headquartered here and coming here would be very important because the amount of money that it takes to run an endowment on financial aid is a lot,” said Leyva. “Then there are capital needs, so for example, we have a goal of having some sort of venue where we can rehearse and we can perform; to get that sort of access requires a lot of capital that any individual or organization and foundation does not have, so it requires a lot more money and that’s where we get into what is it we need to do as a community here in Northern Virginia.”

“There is Strathmore; there is the Kennedy Center; why doesn’t Virginia have something?” asked Leyva. “With Tyson’s growing so much, it is becoming a city in itself. We need to have something here for this community. People need it, in terms of building a sense of a well-knit community you have to have the arts. Right now, a lot of what used to be the traditional sources of feeling of community, like church and having your family around, all of that is sort of eroding as people move around more. The institutions are going to take over in terms of building that sense of community in things like the arts.”

A community worth living in



President of Board of Directors at AYPO, Karen Leyva: “How do you create a community that is worth living in? When you have the arts and when people spend time enjoying performances and saying, ‘Yes, I am going to enjoy music or an exhibit,’ or ‘I am going to go watch a dance performance.’ That is when you feel like you live in a great place.”

PHOTO COURTESY AYPO

“When we all think about the role of the arts in the community, a lot of the argument is: if you have a vibrant art community, it is going to create this many dollars in the community and that is great, but that is not the only thing. There is the money, but how do you create a community that is worth living in? When you have the arts and when people spend time enjoying performances and saying, ‘Yes, I am going to enjoy music or an exhibit’ or ‘I am going to go watch a dance performance,’ that is when you feel like you live in a great place,” said Leyva and continued, “Even if you are barely able to squeeze in two hours to do it, you are in a great place because you have access to that, so in terms of what the community should be as a whole, it has to include that. Otherwise, we are just running around like mice in a wheel, trying to check off the box, go to work, make sure our kids know how to play an instrument, but for what? Why do we do it? It is not just to say we did it and go to college. It is to teach everyone there is value in the arts.”

The second challenge

“We also need support in creating a network of all of these organizations,” shared Leyva and explained, “We are all operating out there by ourselves, struggling to get the money to do this, struggling to perform. We’re performing in small places and we’re performing in front of parents; we’d like to perform in front of other audiences. To create that network requires venues, requires money, and other groups have this. The real estate community, for example, they have all these get-togethers everywhere to discuss what is going on; well, we need that too. We need to meet with The Maryland Classic Youth Orchestras (MCYO) and some of these other organizations that are working with the arts and young people, but not only young people, because our young people grow up to go to the Kennedy Center, right? So all the arts organizations, get them all together and have them all have this community, the echo system where they can share ideas on how to fund, how to have a junior orchestra, a senior orchestra ... all these things should be connected. So that is what I would like to see.”