Seattle JazzED has grown by leaps and bounds, providing jazz classes to kids who may otherwise not have access

May 16, 2019 at 10:05 am Updated May 16, 2019 at 10:08 am

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Special to The Seattle Times

Gospel singer Cora Jackson uses flash cards to teach beginning vocals to students in JazzED, a nine-year-old nonprofit that provides jazz education to kids from preschool to high school. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)
2 of 8 | Gospel singer Cora Jackson teaches beginning vocals to students in JazzED. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)

3 of 8 | Wayne Horvitz’s Creative Orchestra Project rehearses at JazzED, site of the former Martin Luther King Elementary School. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)
Tony Sodano’s drum line, part of JazzED’s offerings, rehearses in the parking lot of the former Martin Luther King Elementary School. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)
6 of 8 | Clarence Acox, director of Garfield High School's award-winning jazz band, is one of the founders of JazzED. (John Lok / The Seattle Times)

7 of 8 | Laurie de Koch, left, is executive director of JazzED and one of its founders. Kelly Clingan, right, is education director. (Dean Rutz / The Seattle Times)
“OK, let’s do it as a round,” suggests Cora Jackson to 11 animated fourth- and fifth-graders sitting in a slightly arced line of folding chairs.

Behind her, accompanist Sherrell Mitchell sets a jaunty tempo at the piano, as Jackson cues one half of the class, then the other, to sing staggered, overlapping parts.
It’s Wednesday, so Jackson is teaching beginner-level piano and choir, something she does when she’s not leading Seattle’s JudahSong gospel choir. In an hour, award-winning pianist and composer Wayne Horvitz and his nine-piece Creative Orchestra Project will be here, filling the room with contemporary sounds. Through all of this, deputy director Britt Madsen sits at one of two computer stations beneath the famous 1958 black-and-white photo of jazz luminaries, “A Great Day in Harlem,” occasionally answering the phone.

Welcome to Room 107 of the former Martin Luther King Elementary School, Madison Valley headquarters of Seattle JazzED, a nine-year-old nonprofit that provides jazz classes to kids from preschool to high school. In this cramped office that also serves as a rehearsal room, JazzED is reaching out to kids of color, girls, and children from low-income families — groups that, for a variety of reasons, have not been well-served by Seattle’s nationally famous public-school jazz programs.

It has been highly successful in that endeavor, in some cases attracting a student population that is more than 86% nonwhite. This year, it also sent its Girls Ellington Project
to the prestigious Savannah Music Festival, the only all-girl big band competing at that event.

The recipient of a 2015 Mayor’s Arts Award, JazzED has grown exponentially since its inception in 2010. In a bold move, last year it launched a $12 million capital campaign to put up its own building in the Rainier Valley, on a block formerly occupied by the Imperial Lanes bowling alley. It will include the first performance hall ever built in Seattle specifically for jazz.

“I think they’re doing great work,” says John Gilbreath, executive director of Seattle’s Earshot Jazz, which will present the Girls Ellington Project in June. “They are savvy and ambitious.”

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On Sunday, May 19, JazzED showcases its ensembles in an annual, all-day Jamboree at Bellevue College.

**Birth of JazzED**

JazzED was born during a conversation more than a decade ago between JazzED executive director Laurie de Koch and Garfield High School’s jazz band director, Clarence Acox. Fittingly, they were on a school bus, on their way to the Lionel Hampton Jazz Festival in Moscow, Idaho. De Koch told Acox she loved it that her son could play jazz at Garfield, but she was concerned that kids without resources were being left out.

She was right. Though the situation has improved in recent years, music education in Seattle schools has been historically uneven, with lower-income areas often overlooked. The jazz bands at Garfield and Roosevelt high schools are mostly composed of white kids, primarily male. Many of them have had music instruction from an early age, including private lessons.

Acox was aware of this problem, and heartily agreed to help de Koch. In 2010, de Koch enlisted fellow Garfield High School jazz parent Shirish Mulherkar, and he, de Koch and Acox fired up JazzED.
That first year, the modest new nonprofit offered classes to 56 students — beginning, intermediate and advanced jazz band and a contemporary ensemble taught by Horvitz. The annual budget was $101,000. This year, there are more than 1,300 students and the budget stands at $960,000. The organization boasts 11 academic-year ensembles, six summer camps (including one that is entirely free), eight to 10 small combos, three fall “boot camps” for beginners, a college audition workshop, a preschooler WeBop program (a Jazz at Lincoln Center license program) and introduces more than 6,000 kids a year to jazz at elementary school assemblies.

The growth, success and vision of JazzED stem in part from the deep financial and fundraising backgrounds of de Koch and Mulherkar. De Koch led the capital campaign for McCaw Hall and served as the development director for the Seattle Youth Symphony. Mulherkar retired several years ago from an investment banking career with Ragen MacKenzie. One of their first angel investors was David Zapolsky, currently general counsel for Amazon.

“That got us off the ground,” says de Koch.
According to in-house demographics, JazzED is making real progress in bringing girls, students of color and students from low-income families into the jazz fold. Its prep classes — which provide instruction for beginners — are 86% nonwhite, its large ensemble program, 49%. Girls account for 48% of the prep groups and 31% of the large ensembles. And 92% of prep-class students and 59% of large-ensemble kids receive financial assistance.

Registering for JazzED classes can be done online or over the phone. Full tuition costs range from $525 for a one-week summer camp to $1,175 for a five-month ensemble program. But JazzED offers a sliding scale for all its programs. Some families pay no tuition at all. Others pay a percentage or all of the cost. (Some even opt to add a donation.) There are no financial forms to fill out.

De Koch feels this approach better reflects JazzED’s principles and goals of “working on equity, eliminating power dynamics and closing the gap” than the old “apply-and-bestow” model of awarding scholarships.
Donations and grants allow for such generosity, but 50% of JazzED’s budget still comes from earned income, a better-than-average figure in the nonprofit arts world, where 40% is considered good.

Waiting lists are rare. “We never say no to a family,” says de Koch.

“Brave, not perfect”

JazzED’s emphasis on girls gets a big boost from education director Kelly Clingan, a trombonist who taught for eight years at Washington Middle School and recently gave a talk at Lincoln Center about teaching girls to improvise.

“We raise girls in our culture to be perfect and we raise boys to fall down and get muddy,” says Clingan. “But that’s what improvisation is all about. It’s falling down and getting muddy and skinning your knees every day. So [we have] this idea here: ‘Brave, not perfect.’”

Clingan offers an annual Girls Jazz Day in September and also teaches the Girls Ellington Project.

“It’s one of the greatest bands I’ve ever been a part of,” says 18-year-old trombone player Ruby Higashi. “It’s not just that we play jazz and we’re all girls. We’re really serious about it.”

Higashi goes to Seattle’s Nova High School, where there is no music program. She says she would “definitely not” be playing jazz if it were not for JazzED.

But even kids who enjoy strong school jazz programs find enrichment at JazzED.

“I get to play with people from all around the city,” says Jahnvi Madan, a reed player at Bellevue’s Newport High School who’s also in the Girls Ellington Project and has formed an all-female traditional jazz group, Jahnvi’s Hot Five, with musicians she met at JazzED.
Fostering an artistic community

Fostering an artistic community that reaches across the economic and racial borders of neighborhood schools and school districts is precisely what JazzED is all about, says Mulherkar.

“One of our fantasies is that (the new building) becomes a gathering space for youth performance arts,” says Mulherkar.

A new performance space is just one element of the 15,000-square-foot blueprint for JazzED’s planned new headquarters in Rainier Valley, which will finally give them an office that doesn’t double as a rehearsal room. More surprisingly, the building will also include five floors of affordable housing.
“About two-and-half years ago,” explains de Koch, “we were approached by the development director of Lake Washington Girls Middle School, who is a JazzED mom. She said, ‘Hey, we bought this property and we’re codeveloping it with the Giddens School, but we can’t afford to develop the whole block. We want to sell off a third of it, will you be our neighbor?’”

At first, the cost of the land — $2.4 million — seemed out of reach, but partnering with Capitol Hill Housing, which had already put up a similar project in its namesake neighborhood, 12th Avenue Arts, suddenly made the project seem possible.

With a million-dollar lead gift from an anonymous donor and a half-million-dollar commitment from its board, JazzED took the plunge. It hopes to move in to a completed building by fall 2022. (The two schools are already going up, set to open this fall.)

The total cost of the building is $40 million and JazzED’s share will be a quarter of that, $10 million. (JazzED’s $12 million capital campaign includes maintenance reserves and the cost of the campaign itself.)

“It’s a big stretch,” says JazzED board member Kathryn Robinson. “But right now is a great moment, when the city is feeling flush, and even more important, when equity is on everybody’s mind. [This] felt like a beautiful synthesis of these two endeavors — arts education for kids and low-income housing.”

Back in Room 107 a few weeks ago, the kids in Acox’s Quincy Jones Big Band have more mundane things on their minds — like getting that tricky trombone part right in Tom Garling’s tune, “And Another Thing . . .”

“It’s two weeks from today,” says Acox of the upcoming Jamboree.

You can bet that the JazzED kids will have it down before the show.

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**Seattle JazzED Jamboree!** 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Sunday, May 19; Carlson Theater, Bellevue College, 3000 Landerholm Circle S.E., Bellevue; free; 206-324-5299, seattlejazzed.org