



ART FOR ALL

Rosalind-Denise Rogers uses music to prepare students for bright futures

By Sarah Freiberg

As a little girl in Kansas City, Kansas, educator and founder of the Inner Ear Youth Orchestra Rosalind-Denise Rogers happened to be watching PBS when “I saw an infomercial with an orchestra playing. I looked at the picture, and ultimately there was no ‘me’ in the orchestra. I thought if I played, I would be the only Black person there.” She was excited to be that person though, and told her family that she wanted to learn the violin. Her parents—a second grade teacher and a bus driver/pastor—always supported her in whatever she wanted to do. Soon thereafter, her grandfather, a retired electrician, brought two violins to the house, as he assumed that if Rosalind-Denise wanted to play, her twin sister would, too—which turned out not to be the case.

“That was how I started on the journey. I never had lessons—I was 15 or 16 when I started to look for a teacher for lessons. I played in the school orchestras. I just gleaned things.” And she began to thrive, becoming first chair in orchestras and going on to study music in college, receiving a bachelor’s degree in music education with a concentration in violin from the VanderCook College of Music in Chicago.

In 2017, Rogers moved to East St. Louis, Illinois, to teach at Lincoln Middle School, where she created an after-school string music program as well, leading to the first school orchestra program in East St. Louis in decades. Eventually, her passion for music led her to create the Inner Ear Youth Orchestra, a program dedicated to providing lessons and performance opportunities for children aged 3–18 in her East St. Louis community. Rogers

is committed to giving opportunities to children who have never experienced hearing or playing stringed instruments—and showing them that playing and teaching music is a potential career opportunity.

During pandemic closures, she made sure that all her school students had their instruments and engaged them in online

sports trained, then they can kind of be thrown by the wayside. Music offers options. It takes practice—you have to give to get. I try to teach a lot of things through the music. You have got to do what you *have* to do to do what you *want* to do. And the kids learn how to support each other.”

Through her school and community programs, Rogers has introduced over 1,000 young people to orchestral music in just five years. The Inner Ear Youth Orchestra developed from Rogers’ desire to bring the transformative powers of music to inner-city students in her adopted hometown. As stated on the Inner Ear website: “Our vision is to ensure that all young people, regardless of economic advantage, have the opportunity and tools to experience music in a way that enhances their ability to learn, make positive decisions, and reach their true potential. Our mission is to use music to positively impact the lives of at-risk youth in East St. Louis and the surrounding area . . . We work to build self-esteem, instill self-confidence, and inspire a life-long love of music from all cultures.”

Beginning with the Inner Ear (TIE) orchestra, and expanding recently to include students as young as three in the TIEny orchestra, Rogers has been running a weekly three-hour Saturday morning program that’s free to participants. The kids learn early on Rogers’ “give me 15” rule. “I would like them to practice much more, but we start with that. I tell them that the only difference between you and me is *time*.” She encourages beginning students to stick with it for a little while. “I do believe we should allow children

“
It hurts to see so
little attention
paid to the arts
when the benefits
are immense.

—Rosalind-Denise
Rogers

”

recording projects. She was proud of their progress: “When the students came back to the classroom, they were really ready. They were able to play so quickly.” Rogers is grateful for the support of her school, allowing her program to flourish. “I compete with sports. Practicing and confidence building are a part of both. If the kids aren’t

to experience new things before they say no. Let them learn a song, but until they have achieved something, we can't let them stop." She wants them to be responsible for their own growth and stresses to them that "learning to play requires respect from both sides. Teachers are being very generous with themselves to share their knowledge—and they should be respectful of the students because they are human."

Rogers finds that many of her students have begun to play at a later age and that they are more motivated when the music they learn is something they and their families know. Toward that end, Rogers has been developing a teaching repertoire that builds technique but also is familiar to the students. "When I give a student the song 'Lean on Me,' they are going to play a song that everyone knows, and they won't be thinking about how to play one finger at a time. Then you get the parents onboard, and students can play this one at holidays for their grandparents—



COURTESY OF THE INNER EAR YOUTH ORCHESTRA

Juilliard

Transforming passion into artistry

Join a supportive community of talented young musicians, incomparable faculty, and renowned guest teachers and take advantage of all that Juilliard offers, including

- Undergraduate and graduate degrees and diplomas
- A curriculum designed to develop your artistic and intellectual curiosity
- A conservatory environment that fosters interdisciplinary collaborations across Juilliard's dance, drama, and music divisions
- Performance opportunities at iconic venues on our Lincoln Center campus, throughout New York City, and beyond



APPLY BY DECEMBER 1

juilliard.edu

PHOTO: ERIN BAIANO

kids learn songs because they want to do so at the dinner table.” She is making a list of the music she uses and working on expanding her repertoire, with the hope of codifying it down the road.

What makes the Inner Ear Youth Orchestra special, says Rogers, “is the ability to provide the inclusive space kids and their families need. When we play together, we don’t know about the life of anyone else on the stage. People find the music important enough to share with other people. When we are together, bow to string, it doesn’t matter who your family is. It speaks to opportunity—each person is equally proud—whether you are a doctor’s kid or your mom is out of work. It takes them to places they have never been before.”

Recently the group opened for the St. Louis Civic Orchestra. Some of the students haven’t had the chance to travel very far from home. “Some of them had never been to the (St. Louis Gateway) Arch. We want to

expose them to many different things as well as teach them to play an instrument. It’s such a holistic approach. It hurts to see so little attention paid to the arts when the benefits are immense.” Rogers sees potential everywhere. The Inner Ear set up a table at a 2022 Juneteenth event, and a little girl dragged her father over and asked if she could try a violin. When Rogers showed her how to hold it, she wondered “if maybe it instilled a love of music in a child.” If there were any doubt, the child whispered to her, “I’m going to ask my dad for one of these for my birthday.”

When her grandfather became ill, Rogers was able to visit him shortly before he passed away. He had started her on her musical journey, providing her with her first violin, and Rogers notes: “He got to see the organization started. He was able to see the launching of the Inner Ear Orchestra and tell me that he was proud of my success.” She had the honor of playing at his funeral.

Since becoming a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable organization in 2020, the Inner Ear Orchestra has been able to accept grants and donations. Rogers was named Art Educator of the Year for 2022 by the Arts & Education Council, and is a 2021 recipient of the Emerson Excellence in Teaching Award. But she dreams of more.

“I’ve taught in closets, in hallways,” she says. “I can teach anywhere and students can learn anywhere. But we need a building.” Besides finding a permanent home for the group, Rogers envisions increasing staff, offering transportation for students, and expanding to a full orchestra, not just strings. And she would love to branch out and coach other urban string programs as well. She’s working on a master’s degree in nonprofit management and is studying at the National Bornoff Summer Workshop in Kansas to help hone her curriculum and reach her goals. With her curiosity, drive, and talent, she is clearly on her way. ■

University of Massachusetts | Amherst



String & Orchestral Programs

B.M. in Performance, Music Education, and Composition

B.A. in Music with tracks in Music History, Music Theory, and Performance

M.M. in Performance, Music Education, and Orchestral Conducting | *Teaching Assistantships available*

Ensembles: Two orchestras, chamber orchestra, and several chamber ensembles

Faculty: Elizabeth Chang, Kathryn Lockwood, Edward Arron, Salvatore Macchia, Morihiko Nakahara

AUDITIONS FOR FALL ADMISSION February 2023

Information, Admissions, or to Visit:
413-545-6048 / musicadmissions@umass.edu

Watch the video about our program at
umass.edu/music/strings