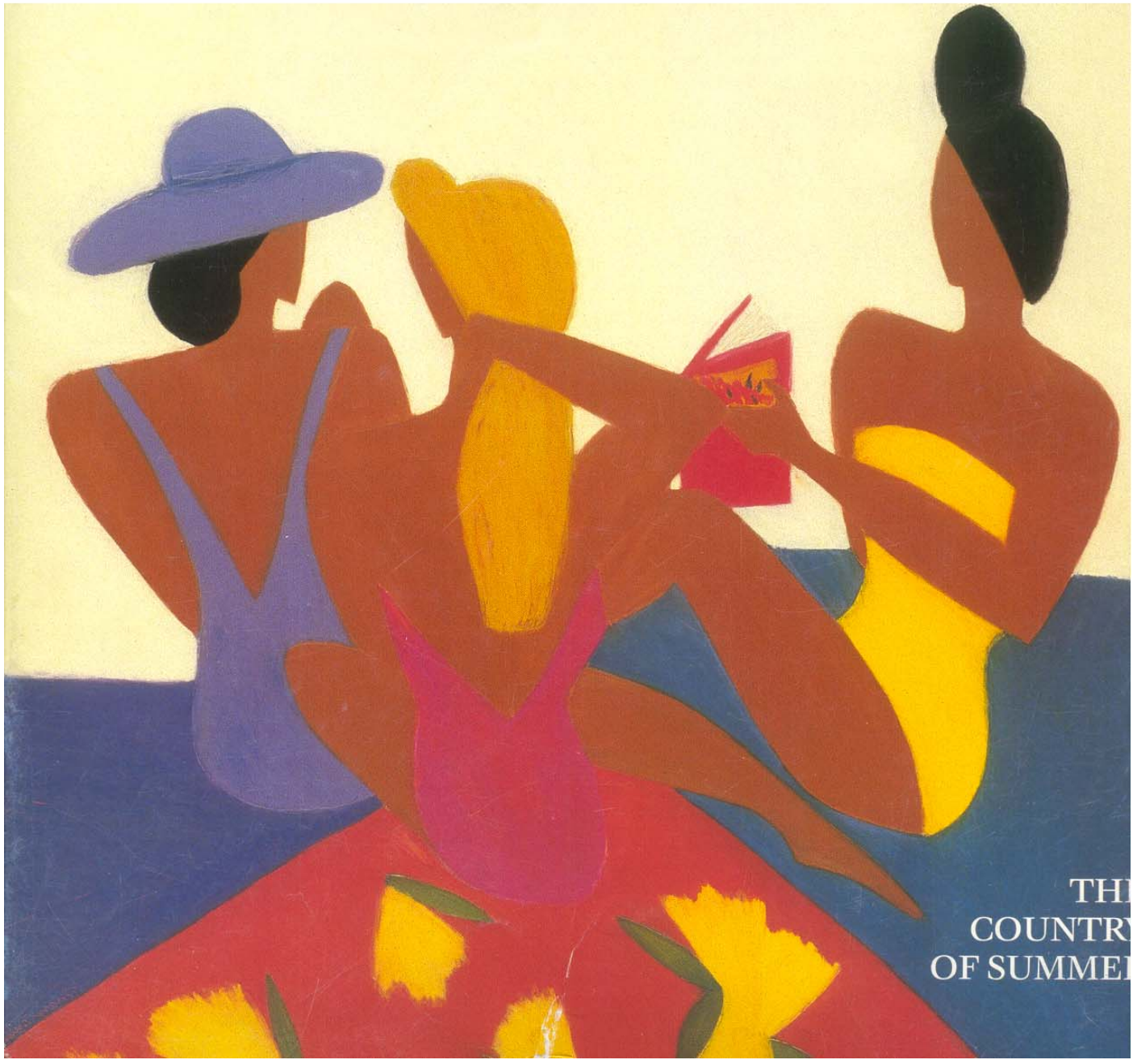
PORTLAND

THE UNIVERSITY OF PORTLAND MAGAZINE SUMMER 200



TH
COUNTR
OF SUMME

THE SHOESTRING QUARTET

A tale of four motley young alumni, hundreds of exuberant children, blues guitar, a leaky roof, seven dwarves, eighth notes, the Congo, and a lonely ukelele.

By Todd Schwartz

vivace: *spirited, bright, rapid*

The kids don't so much file into the room as bandsaw into it, a cut of wild fourth- and fifth-grade energy into the narrow, unadorned Salvation Army space. The exceptions are Hannah, a tiny, thoughtful collection of blonde curls, and Latisha, a shy, big-boned girl who comes in last.

At one end of the room are eight programmable electric pianos on a long table. Chairs are stacked two and three high at each place. The five students in the Saturday morning piano class more or less assume their positions. Hannah's brother Elliot climbs onto his pile of chairs like it was playground equipment; she seats herself as if this was Carnegie Hall. A tall girl named Trisa briefly refuses to sit down, running around the room looking for some combination of attention and trouble. She wears five or six ponytails wrapped with colored ribbons; her head resembles a short-handed octopus at Mardi Gras.

"All right, hey, two minutes of free time, then we work on our songs," says Michelle Boss '00, who teaches this class. The kids put on the headphones that are plugged into each keyboard and begin to play. Such insulation from each other's noodlings is necessary to what little concentration appears to exist: Trisa bangs away as though her keyboard swarms with mosquitoes, Elliot programs his instrument to make sustained electronic horror-movie noises, and Latisha barely moves. Only Hannah plays her music, then casually announces, "Am I the *only* one playing the Indian Song without a book?"

When the two minutes are up, Boss — 22 years old with 15 years of piano training and patience like Job on herbal tea — hands out "Music Lesson Book, Level 1A." The familiar notes and scales are decorated with animals and children — part musical score, part *Goodnight Moon*.

"Let's work on the songs we'll play tomorrow," says Boss. The kids are to play a Sunday afternoon recital for family and friends. "Headphones off. Let's do the Happy Song — start on F."

Trisa immediately begins to act up, but Boss calms her down and eventually gets her to play — and music begins to issue from her recently frenetic right hand. "Do you know it using both hands?" Boss asks quietly, then moves on to the other students, one by one. Soon the room is filled with the Happy Song times five, which by proper name is "Whistle While You Work" from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Just whistle while you work (whistle)
Put on that grin and start right in to whistle loud and long

"Each hand takes turns now."

Just hum a merry tune (hum)
Just do your best and take a rest and sing yourself a song

"Elliot, you have to learn the second verse too."

When there's too much to do, don't let it bother you
Forget your troubles, try to be just like a cheerful chick-a-dee

"How do we remember the lines in the bass clef? That's right — Good Books Don't Fall Apart! Treble clef? Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge!"

And whistle while you work (whistle)
Come on get smart, tune up and start to whistle while you work

"You did it, Latisha!"

At noon, Boss gathers up her kids and takes them across the Moore Street Community Center parking lot to a ramshackle building on the corner. The busy intersection of North Portland's Williams Avenue and Killingsworth Street is just past the curb, so good, safe behavior on this migration is rewarded with Jolly Rancher lollipops. In a large room on the ground floor of the building, another music lesson is just finishing, so Boss' class waits on the sidewalk for a few minutes. They are eager to play on the real piano inside.

"Remember," Boss instructs over the thumping of mega-bass from a passing car, "No suckers at the keyboard!"

Above the dented door is a painted sign bearing a logo that can best be described as a Mayan smiley face and the words "Ethos, Inc., Portland's Nonprofit Music Center." It is here that an amazing group of young University of Portland alumni are doing their wing-and-a-prayer damnedest to keep music education alive for low- and middle-income families in the Rose City.

"What's your favorite kind of music?" someone asks while the kids wait.

"Rap!" Trisa shouts, busting a move or two for emphasis.

"Rock," says another kid.

"Jazz," Latisha adds quietly.

"Techno and house!" Elliot chimes in, with so much enthusiasm that his glasses fall off.

When the laughter subsides, Hannah looks up through her curls and lays out the last word. "Tango," she says.

da capo: *from the beginning*

In early 1998, Charles Lewis '94 was writing Internet policy for Microsoft as part of his master's thesis at Harvard, on his way to an oh-so-21st century career. The problem was, he had music in his head, and it was making it hard to concentrate on the software. He was getting more bored every day.

Born in Montana, raised all over the West, Lewis is one of six children of a low-income single mother. Good brains and good luck had brought him from high school in Anchorage to The Bluff to study business. By the time he graduated *magna cum laude* in 1994, the call of public service had set his course: Lewis joined the Peace Corps and requested the most remote assignment they had. He spent the

PHOTOS BY LÁSZLÓ BENCZE


KOSS

next two-and-a-half years posted alone in the rain forests of the Congo. It was from Central Africa, in fact, that he sent his graduate application to the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and he was deep in the Congo when he was awarded a full scholarship.

The African heat and rain and all-day journeys for supplies seemed far away from snowy Cambridge, but one Congolese memory kept coming to Lewis – the evening when he sat in an isolated Pygmy village and talk turned to music. Lewis, a capable guitar player, was amazed when one of the villagers proudly produced a guitar he had carved from a log, strung with wire from game snares. More than a hundred hours of labor, just to have something to make music. Lewis realized how very lucky he was to have learned to play in grade school – at a time when his mother certainly couldn't have afforded instruments or lessons.

But that early opportunity for music was growing scarce for public school students as the 1990s closed in America, and soon the germ of an idea formed in Lewis' mind. So Charles Lewis, Harvard Kennedy School student body president, abruptly quit working on his thesis and began to volunteer at a tiny folk music center in Massachusetts.

The first thing he did was create an educational outreach program, on the theory that giving a person some folk music was to give them Peter, Paul, and Mary for a day, but teaching them to *play* folk music was to make a Joni Mitchell for life. The music and the idea in Lewis' head grew stronger. He returned to Portland for a visit and realized that public music education in and around the Rose City was in swift decline. Tax limitation measures had cut school funding by 21 percent in just a few years, and the arts programs were the first to go – Portland public schools now had, for every 1,000 students, just two teachers responsible for art, music, and drama. If a kid couldn't afford private lessons there was little or no opportunity to learn to play music. And learning music, Lewis knew, is a powerful tool for learning everything else.

He returned to Harvard, told his advisor he had a new thesis idea, and set about designing a new kind of non-profit organization to bring music and music education to low- and middle-income kids. The only

thing that slowed him down was the fact that he knew absolutely nothing about starting, funding, or running a non-profit organization.

cantata: *short lyric form dealing with sacred subjects*

All human beings are inherently musical. The moment we understand that we can control our limbs, we begin to bang out rhythms. The moment we understand we can make sounds, we experiment with pitch and tone: we sing.

No one knows exactly what happens to our brains while we learn to play music. As with everything committed to memory, some of the billions of neurons in our brains form new pathways and connections, synapse to synapse, electrochemically hard-wiring themselves for a little boogie-woogie. Unlike many skills, however, music is one of the few where the cognitive, the psychomotor, and the affective (brain, body, emotions) must work together.

Like a sport, the key to success in music is constant practice — refining technique until it goes beyond conscious thought and we are free to make our moves, our choices, our notes, on the fly.

Music is one of the two areas of human endeavor that consistently produce child prodigies; math is the other. In many ways, music is math you can dance to: the ordering, patterning, recognition of repetition and contrast, identification of constants — it's a numbers game.

The nature of sound itself is mathematical progression. Stretch a string between two points, pluck it, and it will vibrate at a certain number of cycles per second. Cut it precisely in half, and it will vibrate exactly twice as fast as before — or one octave up. Cut it in half again, and it will vibrate four times as fast as the original string. Pythagoras wrote that tune.

Recent research shows that human beings may be born with perfect pitch — *all of us*. But much like the childhood ability to absorb new languages as easily as strained carrots, musical ability and understanding fade as we grow up. And music is a very different animal than language. "Music is not communication, it's expression," notes University music professor Ken Kleszynski. "There is a fundamental difference between language and music. When I choose a word, I choose a symbol, one from which I assume, or hope, you will derive the same meaning. But when I play music, I'm expressing some state of feeling or emotion that you might perceive in a totally different way. With language that difference in perception can be a problem — if I say *Run, the dam has broken*, and you hear *The sun will come up blue*, we're in trouble. But with music it's not critical to me if you understand what I express, and in fact different levels of understanding open the music in interesting emotional ways."

The levels of musical understanding are made further complicated by cultural differences. European cultures have done complex and lovely things with harmony, African cultures have done the same with rhythm. A British general once invited an Indian raja to a symphony concert, the first Western music the raja had ever heard. When it was over, the bejeweled prince was asked which piece he liked the best.

"The first one," was his reply.

"The Mozart?" asked the general.

"The first one," said the raja. And soon the general realized that what the raja liked best was the orchestra tuning up.

andante: *moderately slow, a walking speed*

By June of 1999, Charles Lewis was back in Portland, sleeping on a friend's couch, armed with a Plan.

The plan was Ethos, Incorporated — "Ethos" from the Greek word for one's defining characteristic, and "Incorporated" because Lewis, an astute student of American commerce, was convinced that a workable non-profit must be envisioned and run as a business. He filed for nonprofit tax status, then did what every red-blooded American entrepreneur does when he or she has a great idea and no dough: he pulled out his credit card.

Five thousand dollars later, Lewis had a jazzy brochure — "People are very visual, and it's much easier for them to believe you are a successful organization if you have a printed piece that looks impressive," he says — and a Web site and a tiny, $175-a-month office downtown, in which were a used computer, an old desk, an old chair, and a strange machine that functioned as phone, fax, and copier all at once.

"It was difficult," says Lewis. "I didn't have any money. I was going deeper into debt all the time. But I wanted to make this happen. I wanted to help people. So I turned to my home base, the University, and I got great advice from professors Jim Moore and Brother Donald Stabrowski and Roger Doyle, and from student services vice president John Goldrick, who was Peace Corps director in Kenya and Ghana, and I recruited young alumni and students to teach music lessons, and begged for classroom space and instruments to use. I don't know where Ethos would stand right now without the University connection."

Connections, like guitar chords, were something Lewis knew how to play. He called Portland's mayor, Vera Katz, in whose office he'd once had a summer job. He called former U.S. Senator Mark Hatfield, for whom he had interned. He called U.S. Congressman Earl Blumenauer because he knew someone who worked for him. Soon he had letters of support from all of them.

Then he went fund-raising. Over and over, Lewis described the list of programs he'd conceived to answer the growing need for affordable music education in Portland. The first of those programs became real on October 25, 1999, when Michelle Boss, then a University student, led ten young piano neophytes into a room on The Bluff. One week later, Ethos' first grant arrived in the mail:

a $5,000 check from the Lorene Sails Higgins Charitable Trust. Charles Lewis' defining characteristic was up and running.

scherzo: a *sprightly movement*

Blues man Jon Koonce stamps the floor with his leather boots and works his guitar hard as he delivers some classic call-and-response to the crowd.

"Wasn't for *bad* luck" — *bah dah dah dah*

"Wouldn't have no luck at all" — *bah dah dah dah*

The crowd, maybe 500 strong and sitting mostly cross-legged on the gym floor, giggles and claps away in a cacophony that would have Leadbelly spinning in his grave like an old 78.

"I say wasn't for bad luck" — *bah dah dah dah*

"Just wouldn't have *no* luck at all."

While the pathos may be wasted on these children, ages 5 to 12 — not much been-down-so-long-it-looks-like-up-to-me in *this* room — none of Koonce's joy is lost on them.

As part of its series of free school

music assemblies, Ethos has brought Koonce to Pleasant Valley Elementary School, out where Portland goes slowly rural, suburban lawns giving way to pastures and Christmas-tree farms.

Before the assembly begins, Koonce sits alone under the basketball net and the wire-covered light fixtures, tuning his guitar. Behind him are walls of old honey-colored wood and a few narrow, perfectly creaky bleachers.

"There's a large musical generation gap," he answers when the question of why he's here is asked. "Current pop culture serves up a lot of the same kinds of stuff to these kids. What I'm trying to do is broaden their musical range a bit. I'm going to sing the blues and some Americana, going to sing about everything from Martin Luther King to the Battle of New Orleans. You can never tell with kids — they might not seem to be paying any attention, but something is sinking in. I guess the best I can hope for is that I don't put them to sleep!"

And soon the Pleasant Valley Elementary School student body is

entering the gym in a single line, class by class.

"Mrs. Buxton's class is coming in *nice and quiet*!" enthuses the school principal into the mike.

The teachers arrange the kids in neat rows.

"Second grade is sitting *very* nicely." The process takes slightly less time than opening ceremonies for the Olympics.

Ethos staffers Adam Reid and Eleanor Cosgrove '99 warm up the room. "We have music with us today," Reid says. When he adds, "There may even be dancing!" the kids respond with a long "*Oooooo*." Cosgrove talks about what Ethos does, then talks about how music makes people feel. She tries, a little, to explain what blues music is about.

Then Koonce takes the stage, and it requires next to no coaxing to get the kids clapping and singing. This is an inhibition-free zone. Koonce teaches, a little, as he sings; talks about chords and percussion and history, and maybe something is sinking in. Hard to tell. The kids, certainly, aren't going to sleep.

His finale, in fact, a rocking take on "Who Do You Love?," causes minor chaos as Koonce gets the students up on their feet stomping and clapping and dancing and jumping and generally raisin' kiddie Cain. Enthusiasm triumphs soundly over rhythm.

Got a little house by the roadside, made outta rattlesnake hide...

Somewhere Bo Diddley is smiling. Fingers in his ears, maybe, but smiling, because we have music with us today.

obbligato: *required, indispensable*

"I believe the reason music education is being lost in our schools isn't because we don't take music seriously *enough*," says Kleszynski, the University music professor who directs bands, chorales, orchestras, and jazz combos on The Bluff. "It's because we take it *too* seriously.

"We feel that music is for a select few, that you need to be exceptionally gifted to do anything with it. We tend to believe that music only matters if you are a professional performer. But that's crazy. Music is one of the best ways that kids can feel successful. It teaches the importance of revision and concentration. It contributes to our physical development and our ability to express ourselves."

Charles Lewis agrees. "When music education programs are cut, kids who lack financial resources suffer the most," he notes. "Kids from a wealthier background can always take private lessons. We want to even the playing field. There have been *so* many studies that link music education to increased cognitive and emotional development. Every child should have music opportunity. *Every* child."

Lewis is right: research on the benefits of music education makes a case for everything from higher SAT scores to physically bigger brains. Scientists at the University of California in Irvine report that after six months of piano lessons, preschoolers performed 34 percent higher on spatial-temporal testing than those without the lessons. The journal *Nature* reports that German researchers found the area in the brain used to analyze musical pitch was an average of 25 percent larger in musicians. A Texas Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse study shows that "secondary school students who participated in band or orchestra reported the lowest use of alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs." The journal *Neurological Research* published results showing that after learning eighth, quarter, half and whole notes, second- and third-graders scored 100 percent higher than their peers who were taught fractions using traditional methods. The list goes on.

"We should never give up on music for our kids," says Jason Davis, Ethos' director of music education, an accomplished pianist and singer, and a man possessing bachelor's and master's degrees from the University (in 1998 and 2000). "It's easy for parents and school administrators to believe music isn't necessary because it doesn't lead to a future career. But what it *does* do is just as important. Music increases the quality of life a hundredfold. It helps you express and maintain your emotions. It makes you a better person inside and out."

allegretto: *moderately fast*

By the spring of 2000, Lewis had added a couple of staff members — paid for, to the tune of $150 a week, by a grant from the federal government's Americorps/VISTA program, a kind of domestic Peace Corps. Lewis himself, recent winner of Harvard's Robert F. Kennedy Award for Excellence in Public Service, had taken no salary since he came back to Portland and founded Ethos in 1999. Living frugally, however, was a skill he had mastered in Africa, as was perspective: he well knew that the lowest low-budget life in America would still make him Bill Gates in the Congo.

The Ethos Music Lessons for Kids program was growing more popular each month, ranging in price from as little as $20 ($5 every couple of weeks, if money's too tight to mention) for eight weeks to a still-bargain $65 for those families who could afford it. And Ethos had begun to collect donated musical instruments to make available to needy students: flutes, clarinets, trumpets, trombones, a few saxophones, pianos, keyboards, violins, cellos, guitars, a bass guitar, a dulcimer, a steel drum, kazoos, recorders, harmonicas, drums and drum sets, some lonely accordions, ukeleles, one pan flute, and something called a violin uke — a rare kind of ukelele played with a bow. No one ever asked to borrow that one.

Always on the lookout for revenue-generating possibilities, Lewis had found an abandoned building in north Portland — leaky roof, fallen ceilings, broken windows, and all — that he envisioned as a combination

office, teaching space, and concert venue. He figured that performances by local players on Friday and Saturday nights would build excitement about music and help pay the bills.

The owner of the eyesore was more than happy to exchange cheap rent for free renovation, and the Ethos staff, along with every paint-splattered, drywall-dust-covered volunteer they could recruit, went to work re-wiring, re-plumbing, and repairing the derelict structure. By summer, the result was Club Ethos, a performance space furnished in the latest garage-sale chic. Soon an eclectic group of home-grown acts were rocking, rapping, folking, and countrifying the house at five bucks a head: Mud Bugs, Plaid Sheep, 15-Minute Flares (with Guitar Boy), Thunder Pumpkins, The Fatalistics, Trillium, Purge, I Am, 605 Inc., Hustla Organization, Tragic, Mystified, M1, Me and My Brother, Swamp Lotus, Late for Breakfast.

Ethos was beginning to get ink in *The Oregonian* and other local publications, and grants were beginning to... if not exactly flow, at least trickle in. From the Oregon Arts Commission to Fred Meyer, from Albina Rotary to the University of Portland, Lewis' favorite kind of music became the sound of people getting on the bandwagon. He rewarded himself with a $250-a-week salary. He and his staff continued to put in 60- and 70-hour weeks. He continued to make call after fund-raising call. And, in a society where kids are surrounded by music every waking moment, yet have fewer and fewer chances to learn how to make that music, Lewis and his staff continued to imagine new ways to change the tune.

tutto: *all, whole*

There's tension in the room — as much as can be mustered in a space crowded with fat, slightly threadbare sofas and chairs that could be cartoon characters. One member of the audience for today's recital sits in a cast-off hairdresser's chair; fortunately he's short enough so his head isn't inside the pink-flecked bubble of the hairdryer. Various instruments hang on the walls. A small stage is tucked into one corner.

The audience of a dozen or so parents, grandparents, and siblings are the cause of the anxiety. "I don't even know where to put my hands now!" complains one nervous performer, stymied by the size of the keyboard on the baby grand. The little girl's feet fall a growth spurt or two short of the pedals. Michelle Boss gently takes her hands and gets her started, reassuring her that this particular crowd is a pushover.

It's a Sunday afternoon, and Boss has worked every day for more than two weeks. So have all the young Ethos staffers, it seems. Charles Lewis answers overdue e-mail at one computer, Jason Davis lays out a class schedule on another. Twelve years of higher education and two master's degrees between them, and their combined earnings total maybe seven bucks an hour. And it's clear as C sharp that neither one of them cares. Their ethos is Ethos.

As the recital progresses behind him, and the same simple song is played at least 14 times, Davis unconsciously conducts with his left hand as his right works the mouse. When asked if he's in it for the money, he says "Yes, definitely," then gives his real answer with no trace of self-consciousness. "Music is my life," he says. "It always has been my life. The best thing I can do with my skills is to share them, to share my love of music. By starting at an early age with kids, especially these kids who might not otherwise have a chance to play, I think we can give them a better life. They'll always be able to create music and express themselves. Teaching kids to play, and playing myself, that's what my whole life will be."

forte: *loud, strong*

And now it is the summer of 2001, and the Ethos, Inc. staff has grown to eight, and several hundred low- and middle income kids all over Portland and environs are tickling the ivories, strumming the strings, pounding the skins, and blowing their horns under the umbrella of Ethos' growing At-Risk Educational Outreach Project. A few sound like they may someday have what it takes to compete for scholarships at the next level, predominately private-lesson-prepared enclaves like Portland's Youth Philharmonic. The rest are simply having a great time, oblivious to the nurturing of their neurons.

Charles Lewis' credit cards are paid off, more or less. The violin-uke is still gathering dust. The music lessons, by contrast, are hopping; the free school assemblies will resume in the fall; the instrument drives play on. There are new rock band classes and jazz ensembles for high school students, and even classes in how to record music in Ethos' small studio set-up. Another novel Ethos creation, Musicorps, will again bring more than two dozen young instructors, mostly college music students (many from the University) into Portland elementary schools in the fall. Classroom space and even musical instruments sit unused in these schools, and Musicorps matches access and opportunity with kids in need, overcoming transportation and financial limitations. And recently the Collins Foundation stepped forward with a $20,000 grant to help fund Lewis' latest creation, the Music Mobile, which will put music education on the road.

Lewis would like to take Ethos nationwide over the next few years, and, although the fledgling organization is still flying by the seat of its well-worn pants, it would be a mistake to underestimate him. The only thing he'd rather do than go big, in fact, is go home.

"You know, I would love it if all the music programs were put back into the elementary and middle schools and we didn't have to do any of this," Lewis says. "If we could just fold up shop. It's always been our goal to get music education back in the schools and keep it there, but it takes a big commitment from administrators, from teachers, from parents, from the community. I believe everything is cyclical, and someday people will realize what their children are missing. Then the tax money will come back for arts programs and Ethos will just move on."

But not until every kid can play the Happy Song. Without a book. □

Todd Schwartz (schwartz@spiritone.com) has profiled many creative and accomplished alumni in these pages: an intensive-care nurse, a brain scientist, the inventor of the surfing wet-suit, a grocer, a fireworks guru, and remarkable nurse from Senegal.

László Bencze (laszlo@spiritone.com), who took the photographs here, also photographed the many children who graced the Spring 2001 issue.