

NEWS / THE EDUCATION GRADEBOOK

In Tampa, a cello instructor teaches at-risk kids more than just music

Bethany Thompson uses string instruments to deliver lessons in patience and communication.



Bethany Thompson leads her students during a strings class at New Life Village on July 20 in Tampa. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]

By **Sonia A. Rao** *Times staff*

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TAMPA — Bethany Thompson pulled up to the nondescript building across from the Hillsborough Juvenile Detention Center.

She drove past the sign for Les Peters Academy, a residential program for teenage girls court-ordered to attend for committing an offense.

She pressed the buzzer at the front. On her back was a scuffed cello case. Inside her tote bag were six music stands and a folder stuffed with sheet music.

A staff member scanned her with a security wand, then unlocked a door and led her down a hallway to a small classroom where six girls waited with cellos and violins. Thompson took a deep breath. As always, she wanted to provide a calm, safe presence for her students.

Thompson, 38, spends every Saturday teaching string instruments to those in juvenile detention and foster care. Having played the cello for decades, she always knew music was a powerful way for the brain to overcome trauma. But while researching music in prisons in graduate school, she found learning string music could improve communication skills, increase ability to manage emotions and build perseverance in youth.

In her class at Les Peters, her students received interventional services like mental health and substance abuse treatment. Most had never been exposed to instruments like the cello or violin and were still learning how to pluck with their fingers. They'd graduate to bows next week.

Thompson brought her tuner around the semi-circle, making sure everyone's instrument was at the right pitch. Then she walked over to a brand new student to adjust her grip on the violin.

“Try to use the soft part of your finger to make that big, beautiful sound,” Thompson said. “That sounds good, doesn’t it?”



Christina Garcia, 13, plays her violin during instructor Bethany Thompson's class at New Life Village on July 20 in Tampa. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]

Finding a purpose

The first time Thompson heard a cello, she was 6 years old. A family friend came over to their house to play.

“I was smitten,” Thompson said.

She begged her parents for lessons, and they finally said yes when she turned 8.

Thompson played every chance she could get — her high school orchestra, a church group that played at a nearby juvenile detention facility.

Then, while pursuing a master’s/doctorate in cello performance at the University of North Carolina Greensboro, she had to decide what to specialize in.

Her favorite part about the instrument was how it helped people. She performed in retirement homes, and folks often came up to her and said listening to her play reminded them of things they had forgotten.

“I haven’t thought of that memory in years,” they said. “But music brings it back.”

Then she came across an article about an orchestra program in a women’s prison in Alaska.

Thompson thought of her uncle, who was incarcerated when she was 29 and talked to her often on the phone about the loneliness, isolation and stagnation of being in prison. She remembered performing at the juvenile detention facility in high school and realizing music wasn’t very accessible to those kids.

And she realized what she wanted — to bring the cello to people who wouldn’t come across it otherwise.

She spent months reaching out to all kinds of correctional facilities.

Finally, she heard back from a juvenile facility in Siler City, North Carolina, that agreed to let her start a string program. Thompson remembers the kids in that facility being reverential toward the cello.

“This is such a fancy instrument,” they said. “Are you sure I can touch it?”

She watched them realize, one by one, that it wasn’t impossible for them to play.



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Believing you can do it

Thompson has every student she teaches sign a behavior contract.

It reads: “As part of the string group, I commit to be in class, set aside distractions, be respectful to instructors and peers and keep trying.”

Class on Saturday at Les Peters started with learning how to cue. That’s when you take a breath to signal you’re about to play. It was only the second class for most of the girls, so they were still working on basics.

They did a warmup drill, then played a few pieces that Thompson handwrote in big letters onto printer paper. They started out simple: “Waltz in 3,” “March in 4,” and a short folk song called “Nampaya Omame.”

Thompson, surprised at their progress, decided to bring out something a little more difficult. “Pizzicato” by Rudolf Matz. When the students saw the piece — six lines of music instead of two, written in smaller font — they gasped.

“I can’t do that.”

“Wait, I’m not ready.”

“It’s too complicated!”

They stumbled through the piece, concentrating intensely. When they reached the end, Thompson was beaming.

“Last week, you said you couldn’t do this,” Thompson said. “Now, you’ve played five pieces!”

“Let’s do it again! Quick, before we lose it!” one student said.

“Can we play Beethoven next?” another asked.



Bringing her music to Florida

After moving to Lakeland with her husband in 2022, the first thing Thompson did was reach out to local arts organizations and detention centers.

“Hey, I’m coming to Florida,” she told them. “This is what I’ve done. Can I come try it at your facility?”

An arts nonprofit agreed to fund a one-year program at Les Peters Academy and Hillsborough Girls Academy, both run by the group True Core Behavioral Solutions. When the grant was up, True Core continued to fund the Les Peters program.

“We’ve seen how these programs really impacted our youth, and we don’t want it to stop,” they said.

Her students have performed for their families, as well as for the public at the Straz Center for the Performing Arts and Florida Southern College. With each concert, Thompson saw their confidence and belief in their ability to succeed grow.

She hopes to find funding to restart the Hillsborough program soon. She also eventually wants to establish a program in adult facilities.

She keeps a list of quotes from her previous students on what the string program has meant to them.

“Whatever I carry with me, the music is a stress reliever and it helps take my mind off other distractions which occur through the week. I can come in here and it puts a smile on my face,” one girl said.

“You might get frustrated, but don’t give up. And that’s what you taught me. No matter how many times I wanted to say, forget it, you told me to keep trying. Until I got it. So I kept trying and I haven’t gave up since,” another told her.

And finally: “I feel like I’m proving those people in my past wrong, because I’m playing the violin. If I can play the violin, then I really can do good things in life.”



Bethany Thompson leads her students during a strings class at New Life Village on July 20 in Tampa.
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Gaining confidence

After the hourlong class at Les Peters, Thompson got back into her car and drove 30 minutes to Tampa’s New Life Village, a residential community for youth involved in foster care. The kids at New Life are in foster families or are living with relative caregivers, and have been impacted by the trauma of being removed from their biological parents.

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Thompson reached out and started a string program there in the fall of 2023.

Her presence has given the kids a healthy, meaningful connection with an adult who has consistently shown up for them, said New Life's programs director, Natalie Gomez. Gomez said she's seen kids who previously created holes in the wall or slammed things when they experienced intense emotion turn to their instruments instead.

Once all eight students trickled into Saturday's class, Thompson led them through rehearsal for an upcoming concert. They played "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." She sat next to a younger student whose cello was almost as tall as he was. He had only been playing for a few weeks and was struggling to keep up, so she gave him pointers when he got lost.

When they got to a more complicated song, "Boil Them Cabbage Down," Thompson led them in playing the melody. Her left hand plucked strings while her right hand weaved the bow. Her foot tapped to the beat.

Christina Garcia, 13, played along with her violin and danced to the music. She lives at New Life with her uncle, Chance Cross.



Christina Garcia, 13, plays her violin during instructor Bethany Thompson's class at New Life Village on July 20 in Tampa. [LUIS SANTANA | Times]

Cross encouraged his niece to learn the violin because he wanted her to find a new way to express herself. Her confidence has grown since she started playing. Before this class, Cross said Christina was afraid to do anything in front of people.

"She comes here, she turns into a whole different person," he said.

When she first started the violin a year ago, Christina didn't like it.

"I was nervous," she said. But with Thompson's encouragement, she kept practicing.

"Then, I started to get better and better, and then I got pretty good," she added.

She made a few mistakes at her first concert last December. She was upset at first, but Thompson reminded her that it's OK to mess up, as long as you keep trying.



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