

Charles Lewis and Ethos: *Bringing Music to the Masses*

Sometimes the most ambitious dreams have very humble beginnings.

Charles Lewis' vision of starting up a music education program for Portland area kids began when he returned to Oregon – where he'd attended the University of Portland – after finishing graduate school in June 1999. Like many new graduates, he was short of funds and found himself sleeping on a friend's couch.

Lewis had just earned a master's degree in public policy from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. His thesis involved developing an educational outreach program for a folk music center in Harvard Square in Boston. Lewis was aware of the funding struggles of local schools and he felt that the educational outreach model he'd created could serve as the prototype for a similar program in Portland, an effort that might help fill the hole created by school budget cuts.

And Ethos was born. By October 1999, Ethos was in business with 10 pupils and volunteer instructors culled from University of Portland students. The second session brought in 75 students and the third, 150.

Lewis' idea – to offer music lessons on a sliding scale fee basis to area children, along with other music education efforts – had obviously hit a nerve. "It really snowballed," says Lewis. "It filled a critical need in the school system."

Today Ethos serves a growing population of Portland area youth eager to learn how to play a musical instrument, everything from piano and violin to drums and saxophone. Along with group and individual music lessons offered primarily at the group's headquarters in northeast Portland, Ethos also has several teachers – dubbed the



Charles Lewis created Ethos to fill the void created by cuts in music programs at local schools. PHOTO COURTESY OF ETHOS

Music Corps – who travel to area schools to teach small group lessons. Ethos' Sound School Assembly Program also journeys to schools, often in the organization's converted double decker bus equipped with a fold-out stage, providing concerts and music education. In addition, Ethos collects used instruments, refurbishes

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– Charles Lewis,
Executive Director of Ethos

them and then loans them out to students.

Children who qualify for free or reduced lunches are entitled to free loans of instruments as well as reduced fees for lessons. About half of the population Ethos serves are low-income by that standard. Schools are

also charged on a sliding scale, based on the number of students receiving free or reduced lunches.

At the outset, Ethos was an all-volunteer effort – even Lewis didn't receive a salary for the first 18 months. Funding came "from scratch, with my credit card," says Lewis. (He ended up sleeping on that friend's couch for about a year.)

But over the past four years news of this much-needed program has blossomed. Under Lewis' stewardship, the organization has garnered numerous grants and donations, from smaller contributions from local businesses and individuals to large awards, like a \$200,000 grant from the Meyer Memorial Trust and numerous others from philanthropic foundations.

Ethos' appeal to grant-making organizations is easy to understand. Along with serving about 300 kids at its headquarters and many more at its school-based programs, in 2003 Ethos was named a semi-finalist for the Coming Up Taller awards presented by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities as well as receiving an E-chievement Award, which recognizes individuals who've found positive solutions to challenges in their communities, from National Public Radio's weekly E-town music broadcast.

That allure will come in handy as Lewis works on his next dream: the Oregon Music Academy. The home for the academy will be an 18,000-square-foot historic building in northeast Portland that Ethos purchased from Portland Public Schools last spring. Ethos is raising money to renovate the structure using environmentally-friendly building techniques, with the hope of achieving a Platinum rating – the highest rank available – from the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in

Energy and Environmental Design program, which sets national standards for high-performance, sustainable buildings. If successful, the Oregon Music Academy building will become the first certified historic building in the country to receive the designation.

The entire project is estimated to cost between \$4 million and \$4.5 million. When work is completed, sometime in 2005, the Oregon Music Academy will house classrooms, auditoriums, Ethos' administrative offices – even dormitory space for rural students – and will have the potential to deliver music education to over 5,000 kids. "It will be one of the largest nonprofit music centers on the West Coast," Lewis proudly notes.

Local leaders – like Portland Mayor Vera Katz, who gave Ethos its first cash donation – have no doubt that Lewis will succeed in his latest effort. "He is a breath of fresh air," says Katz. "He is a young man focused and dedicated to public service, wanting nothing in return for himself."

Along with that altruistic nature, what else has inspired Lewis to create Ethos

and now the Oregon Music Academy? It's largely his belief that music education has truly transformative qualities. Lewis points to numerous studies – documented at Ethos' Web site – that conclude that access to music results in a host of positive outcomes, from higher SAT and IQ scores to increased self-esteem.

With budget cuts at local schools, however, "there's a real dearth of music education opportunities for kids," says Lewis. In addition, the high cost of lessons bars many low-income children from participating.

With Ethos, Lewis feels that he's helping to fill that gap. "We're getting music to kids who aren't able to get it in the schools," he explains.

And music, says Lewis, "is something that kids just shouldn't go without."

The deadline to sign up for Ethos' winter term of group classes is Jan. 9. For more information, visit www.ethos-inc.org or call 503-28-ETHOS (38467).

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