

Stanford Thompson – ArtsFund 2019 Luncheon Keynote Speech

Good Afternoon. Ok let's try that again. Good Afternoon! So, I, hope this doesn't fall. I was hoping that my microphone would not work for the next 15 minutes. [Mimes speaking]. Ok.

I love Seattle. I believe that Seattle is the best city on the West Coast. [Audience applause]. Oh wow, ok. I believe the Pacific Northwest is the most beautiful region in this country. And, actually over the past 15 years, I've been here 21 times, and believe this or not, I have only experienced one hour of rain. I will never forget that I was a couple of blocks from here waiting to cross the street because you all believe in actually waiting to do that. A guy looks at me and is like, "Man, you must not be from around here." I said, "Dude, I mean, like seriously, have you seen a black person before?" I mean, I know that this is, and he looks at me and is like, "no, no, sorry I didn't mean that at all, you're just the only one using an umbrella." But, not only that one hour of experience being in the rain, I've also been able to experience several hours of some amazing work happening in the arts here, in and throughout Seattle. If it's watching, literally, a young kid pick-up the trumpet for the very first time in the Seattle Music Partners, or, watching my high school and my college buddies sit in the orchestra here with the Seattle Symphony, and to be able to cheer them on from the audience, it's really incredible that there is this pathway that exists for those that really want to get involved in the arts in a really meaningful way. And that the quality of teaching, the quality of the staffs that work very hard, and of course the generous support of people that live in this area. It is something that the rest of the country, we look at, and we marvel at. I'd like to think that what is going on through the ArtsFund is so much more important so I'm very humbled to be here to share a couple of my thoughts with you. Now, this is a little difficult because the songs the students sang, the other remarks that were made, was literally about 2/3's of my talk, so, I will only be talking to you for about a half-an-hour, but, I do want you all to walk away from the short time that we'll share with how the magic actually happens, how that transformation.

So, I want to take you back to my childhood. I grew-up just outside of downtown Atlanta in the East Lake neighborhood. In this place, it's really a historical area in Atlanta and in the 19th Century it was a huge plantation with hundreds of slaves. When General Sherman came through and leveled Atlanta, East Lake was the only place that he didn't touch. By the end of the nineteenth century, when the city was rebuilding, they put a trolley line and an auto road out to East Lake and people bought summer homes to "get out of the Atlanta heat." They would take a nice dip

in the lake. They were building a certain type of life that by the 1950s the most prominent people in Atlanta lived in this neighborhood. There's a beautiful country club, golf club, and for those avid golfers out there, you know that some of the best golfers were produced in and around Atlanta.

But, in the 1970s, the city decided to build a housing project to make sure that more people had an equitable shot at living in this community. So the black people started moving in, the white people started moving out, and by the time that I was born in the mid-1980s, that community was known as "Li'l 'Nam" for "Little Vietnam." This is where the unemployment rate was 87%. This is where nine out of ten people were the victims of a serious crime. Also where the crime rate, the local crime rate, was 18 times the national average. By the time I became a teenager, I saw all of the kids that I used to play around with, I saw their lives completely changed. They were the ones that were involved now in these crimes. They were being sucked into all of the pressures and stresses that they were living with. I even lost my oldest brother when he was 19, I was 12 or so at the time. A lot of my friends that I grew up with, I wouldn't see them again until our late 20s, early 30s, when they left jail after a decade. With that, taking away a decade of a young person's life when they made a couple of mistakes, we all know is pretty tragic.

The one thing that was different for me and my life was my involvement in music. By the time I graduated from high school, I took my first trip to Seattle. I was able to perform in China and the Czech Republic, Austria and Germany, and all over the United States. I had several private students, where I was making a little bit of money and made more money playing professionally throughout the Atlanta area. What was interesting about that experience was that I had an outlet for all of that stress and all of those problems. I had a way to communicate those things that were really hard for me to put in words. Knowing that there were some things taken away from me that I would never ever get back.

What ended up happening at my household, there's actually eight kids, I'm number seven out of eight, and we kind of had this rule at our house that you only ate dinner on the days that you practiced your instrument. Yeah, we never tested that one out, but I was pretty sure that my dad was going to enforce that one. My family really was my anchor throughout all of it. Also my musical family, they were the ones that believed in me more than I believed in myself. They were constantly pushing me, my teachers and coaches, my mentors, my conductors, always saying "there's this other thing that I think you can achieve," that I thought was impossible.

During those times when I really wanted to give-up, I knew I also did not want to let them down.

So, I moved to Philadelphia, where I had a very transformative experience playing music at super high levels. It really was a treat to go to a place like the Curtis Institute of Music. But what I realized in that journey was that my story, happens few times for kids who grow up like me. The friends that I grew up with, it happens to those types of kids living in poverty and stress way to frequently. What I have seen throughout all of this is that poverty, really does a number on young people and it's dangerous when one thinks the world has nothing to offer them, and that they have nothing to offer the world. They do all sorts of stuff to cope.

Throughout the United States, about one in five kids live in poverty. That's about a little over 15 million young people. In Seattle that rate is only one in nine. However, there are more young people living in poverty than there are adults. In Philadelphia, that number is two out of five. Philadelphia continues, I believe for the seventh or eighth year in a row, to be the poorest major city in the United States. When we look at all of the stress that happens in these kids lives, literally it's turning off parts of their brain that help them to succeed in the classroom, to be a contributing member of their community, and also just to be a good sibling or a good son or daughter.

All of this stuff adds up, and when we think that just the kids sitting through a math class, that they are going to learn everything that they need, that's just not the case. This is where the arts become a really important part of their own development. When all of the stress adds up, you essentially have kids that are entering kindergarten behind and we know that gap widens. It also then perpetuates things that we see in terms of violence in the community, high school drop out rates, and those three indicators alone will also help us to actually map out how much money society will spend and those young people trying to keep body and soul together. It's actually cheaper to lock these kids up into prison then it is to provide the costly government subsidies in the form of housing vouchers, daycare vouchers, food stamps, healthcare, and so forth. So, why not just continue to put them in prison?

This is where I think this magic that we have figured out in Play On Philly comes into play. It's not just enough to say the arts alone helps kids to cope with all of these things. It's really how you go about doing it. So, I am going to say something super controversial, which is, the arts do not make kids happier, smarter, more confident or work in teams. There's a lot of research that points to the correlation between



kids involved in the arts and those great outcomes. Where we then say that the amount of time or maybe the amount of money that is given is fine because the arts do these things. Those in the room that are working really hard to bring quality arts to the community, you all know how much time and resources it takes and those that also generously support it. But, when we look at a couple of things like executive functioning, it's really the ability of someone to set a long-term goal and do all of the small things it takes to accomplish it. Like graduate from high school, there are lots of classes to take and tests, and things to learn and things to learn outside of the classroom that then positions someone to go, perhaps into the military, into college, and of course to finish those if they have the right skillsets.

In my field of music, it's things like, when you tell a kid, to perfect exactly where they are putting their fingers, and learning their scales and memorizing it, we know that it triggers a part of their brain that helps expand their capacity for memorization and for focus. For those times when we tell a kid to observe the rest, break-up the pattern, don't fall into the trap because things change, we know that that increases their capacity for inhibition control. Telling a kid, in the format of an orchestra, to not only read the notes so they know what they have to play, but their fingers have to respond in the right way, while they're listening to their friends, to see if they are in time and in tune with one another, while watching the conductor, who is trying to tell the entire hundred piece orchestra to slow down. Now, this isn't basketball, where half of the kids always have to lose every game. This is where all one hundred kids in this orchestra, they have to play at 110%. One wrong note is a wrong note for the whole orchestra. We replace this sense of competition with this sense of a shared struggle, and when kids learn how to struggle together and uplift one another and then those are the kids that we're putting back in the classroom, and we're putting back into the community, well, guess what happens? Magic.

Then all of the pro-social behaviors, the kids learning how to work with one another, and when the parents see their kids succeeding, they want to succeed too. They want to become more involved with the success of their own child. The community rallies around because then we are finally producing some amazing results for kids in a community that are often overlooked. What's truly remarkable about all of this is really how the magic happens. So, at two-and-a-half hours every day, for the whole school year, and all day, every day for six weeks in the summer, we can actually accomplish these really ambitious goals where our kids are actually performing higher, a letter grade higher, than those kids that do academic tutoring everyday after school. So, to say, perhaps maybe, it is again, in these kids building

these executive functioning skills and these pro-social behaviors, that we're able to see a really, really big change.

Don't you think these are the people you want working in your companies? The people that you want living next door to you? This goes far, far beyond just how do we help kids in a really tough situation just cope with what's going on immediately. Many of you that run companies in this room, you also know that you probably have plenty of employees that had all the resources made available to them and some of the best education, but never learned these critical skills, and you're probably having a hard time figuring out how to, maybe, move your whole company forward, just like us moving communities forward and moving forward all of the great work that we do in the arts.

So, in closing, I want to encourage you all to join me in making a contribution to ArtsFund. It's very exciting to see about the challenge that the board has put forward, and to continue to support the great work that the team at ArtsFund is accomplishing. All of the great work that's happening in organizations across Seattle because we do look at Seattle and we say if it is possible there, then people in Philadelphia, for example, can be more generous. That we can dig a little bit deeper and that we can collaborate in some new and exciting ways.

Again, thanks to ArtsFund. Thanks to all of you for your attention and I wish you all, and our young people in this entire region here the very best.

Link to video of speech: <https://youtu.be/VbstDFbBNCg>