

"A Christian should use these arts to the glory of God, not just as tracts, mind you, but as things of beauty to the praise of God. An art work can be a doxology in itself."

—Francis Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*

by **ROBERT MITCHELL**

Jocelyn Benedict was bullied at school. She had few friends before she began singing in musicals at The Salvation Army's Ray & Joan Kroc Corps Community Center in Ashland, Ohio. Finding a place where she could spread her creative wings for God's glory, she blossomed.

"The second I got there, I found so much love," says Jocelyn, 14. "I was surrounded by other Christians and people who are just so influenced by the Holy Spirit. Being in the musicals we put on is so much fun, and I get to use the gifts God has given me and show other people. It helped me overcome the loneliness that came with bullying."

Jocelyn was a Christian before coming to the Ashland Kroc Center, "but not a strong one," she admits. She was "not good with God," ignored her Bible, and only prayed occasionally. That all changed when the leaders emphasized spiritual disciplines as she honed her voice skills.

"I realized the amazing power of the Holy Spirit. Now I want to read my Bible. I want to pray more. I want to be more involved in youth groups," says Jocelyn, who aspires to be a Salvation Army officer someday.

Jocelyn is one of millions of young people who have found a home through the wide variety of music and arts ministries offered by The Salvation Army.

Kathryn Higgins, director of the USA Eastern Territory's Arts Ministries Bureau,

Creating for the KING

The Salvation Army's music and arts programs change lives and help shape tomorrow's leaders

I've learned how to have more of a connection with God and how not to have negativity impact my life."

hears stories like Jocelyn's over and over again in The Salvation Army world.

"They talk about how they felt disconnected from the church or how the traditions or the rituals of church didn't allow space for them—but the arts did," Higgins says. "I think this is something that's unique to The Salvation Army. We are a church that allows space for individuals who don't always feel like they belong.

"There are so many children who come from the outskirts of society, or who are forgotten, or their dreams are forgotten."

Endless opportunities

The Salvation Army offers a myriad of youth music programs, and the best and brightest gather each year during commissioning weekend for a competition called Star Search, putting on a spectacular variety show. Every summer, many brush up on their music skills at Star Lake Musicamp in the mountains of New Jersey. Others go on to perform as adults with the prestigious New York Staff Band or Eastern Territorial Staff Songsters.

Theater, dance, live audio production, and visual arts take center stage at the annual Territorial Arts Ministries (TAM) Conservatory each summer. And a select group of young people travel overseas and throughout the United States to spread the gospel with the Creatives Arts Service Team (CAST).

Meanwhile, the Arts Ministries Bureau often travels around the territory performing the play *Skeleton Army* and producing Jesus Theatre and RePlay (a Playback Theatre company) at churches, summer camps, and Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Centers.

Every time she performs, Higgins says, audience members come up afterward to share their own experiences in the arts and how those events were pivotal in their lives.

"It helped them work together as a team,

it helped them speak in front of a crowd, it helped them gain confidence or learn how to speak for themselves," she says. "It helped them develop empathy and understand what other people might be going through.

"Over and over, they tell me 'I found a place in the arts.' How amazing is it that The Salvation Army has a broad enough umbrella to reach people who otherwise don't have that space?"

One of those people is Lydmarie Rivera Antonetti of the Guayama Corps in Puerto Rico. She has attended the TAM Conservatory for several years and took every major track before joining the staff this year. Antonetti also has participated in Star Search, Star Lake Musicamp, two years of CAST, and other events since coming to The Salvation Army at age 14.

"I kind of made it my mission to learn a little bit of everything in the arts," she says. "A lot of people who know me might not believe this, but before I came to The Salvation Army, I couldn't talk on stage. I couldn't express myself properly. I was socially awkward. I had stage fright even though I had danced for a few years. The Salvation Army helped me come out of my shell and try new things. I never in my life thought I would try drama. Participating in the Army helped me do that and gave me the motivation."

Antonetti now has the courage to advocate for her island to host more events and training sessions for arts and music. The schools in Puerto Rico usually don't offer much in those areas.

"Without The Salvation Army, I wouldn't be doing the things I'm doing now," she says. "I wouldn't have the confidence. I would still be in a corner and unable to speak up, so I'm grateful to The Salvation Army."

Star power

As the child of Salvation Army officers, Emily Betts learned to play piano and a brass instrument. Today, she is an envoy

who leads worship at the Kearny, N.J., Corps. She also helps with a free music program for children called Forte Friday.

Betts is a huge believer in the impact of this kind of ministry because she's seen how Salvation Army music and arts programs help children grow socially and spiritually. She's seen how they play into children's lives. Public speaking and performing a solo in front of a crowd can be transformative experiences, especially for kids who might be naturally introverted or who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"Maybe they can't afford it or they're not in a school system that offers it, so this brings them into a community that gives them the tools to grow in a way that will benefit their future," Betts says. "It also puts them in an environment that is loving and encouraging, that in every way, shape, and form is trying to exemplify the goodness and love of Jesus Christ.

"I think that's why people keep coming back. They feel loved and welcomed and know somebody is always here to support them and be here for them. I think The Salvation Army does a lot of things right, but one program that really hits the nail on the head is Star Search."

In June, children's laughter, their exuberant energy, and the sounds of musical instruments filled the Hershey Lodge in Hershey, Pa., for the Star Search finals.

Emma Cornell, 13, from the Ithaca, N.Y., Corps, was on hand this year for drama and dance. She says the arts have taught her so much about life and faith.

"I've learned how to have more of a connection with God and how not to have negativity impact my life," she says. "I'm able to share that with my friends who aren't really religious and show them how I'm confident and how much I love God."

Kayli Schoch, 16, from The Salvation Army in Coshocton, Ohio, says, "I play the piano because I want to glorify God. It's one

Glory to God

Clockwise from right: A drummer at Star Lake Musicamp; the Ashland Kroc Center's performance of *Matilda Jr.*, with Jocelyn Benedict at right; kicking off the 2024 TAM Conservatory finale; on stage at the 2024 Star Search Awards.



of my God-given talents, so I have fun with it. I feel God's pleasure when I play."

Performing for God

Kids like that are exactly who Majors Billy and Annalise Francis are trying to reach at the Ashland Kroc Center. When the couple arrived in 2018, the local schools offered few arts programs except band. Within a year, they were planning a musical and have now put on four—*Frozen*, *Annie*, *Mary Poppins*, and *Matilda*. Next up is *Music Man*.

Twenty-five young people came to audition for *Frozen*, and the Francis family knew their new ministry had tapped into something.

"It's just evolved from there," Major Billy Francis says. "In Ashland, we're known as the 'musical theater people.' Christ is the center of everything we do, and we've seen lives changed. We're a place of belonging for these kids. They can't wait for the next show."

The Ashland Kroc offers not only theater but also drama troupes, a singing company, youth chorus, and voice lessons. Major Billy usually arranges the music for the musicals, and Major Annalise, a trained opera singer, handles choreography.

Major Billy says many of the kids are not initially part of the Salvation Army church but end up going to commissioning, youth retreats, and other events where Christ is magnified.

"What we've found is that they've learned that we are a church and we've even seen some of them partake in our church services," he says. "It's been a real joy to see that transpire with some of our children."

More than a song and dance

Major Billy has always been an artsy person. Even though he moved around the territory with his parents, who are

Salvation Army officers, he would perform in high school plays and particularly enjoyed the New York City area and its rich cultural scene while his parents were stationed there.

He studied piano at Hunter College and says several musical mentors played pivotal roles in his life, including Salvationist luminaries like Gordon Ward, Ron Waiksnoris, Donna Peterson, and members of the New York Staff Band. He now tries to return the favor by imparting skills like teamwork, camaraderie, discipline, responsibility, and leadership to his young charges.

The arts help develop more than skills, says Higgins of the Arts Ministries Bureau. She cited studies showing that kids in the arts are more likely to show up for school, earn A's, graduate, vote, and get into college.

"If all that is true, then wouldn't access to arts programming break the cycle of

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: LU RIVERA; TIM BLACK; ANTONIO DI CATERINA; KEVIN DIAZ



Lifting His Name

A rousing night of praise and worship at Commissioning this past June in Hershey, Pa.

ANTONIO DI CATERINA

poverty? If we were able to provide quality arts programming for every youth free of charge, we could break the cycle of poverty in their family,” she says. “It’s ground shaking. It’s like gold and everyone seems to pass it over—and it could change the world.”

Astrid Echevarria, the former director of arts and music in the Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands Division, feels the same way. Many of the kids from the island’s Fortissimo music program, she says, have gone on to earn scholarships and play music in college and in private bands because of what they learned at The Salvation Army.

Fortissimo is offered in four corps in Puerto Rico and involves 50 to 60 kids.

“I’ve seen kids really find themselves on those instruments. They spend a lot of time practicing and they connect to the music,” Echevarria says. “A lot of it is Salvation Army music they’re learning. You also see them getting involved in the corps and become leaders and teachers. It’s really awesome to see them grow in the corps as godly youth.”

She’s also the child of a Salvation Army

officer and a product of the Fortissimo program herself. When her mother was assigned to the San Juan Temple Corps, Echevarria learned to play the cornet and drums there. When she was 15 and her mother was sent to another corps with no music program, Echevarria took matters into her own hands. She volunteered to teach music lessons.

“I found myself rehearsing many nights and just singing to the Lord and playing instruments and learning and teaching as much as I could,” she recalls. “I spent many teenage years in the corps doing that. I spent hours practicing and I found I really enjoyed it. It became an important part of my life. It gave me a place in the corps, in the band, and in the world.

“I see myself a lot in these kids. I was once just like them with no clue and just playing an instrument. Those instruments helped shape my life.”

Evangelism through the arts

Alexis Dill, music director in The Salvation Army’s Western Pennsylvania Division,

says the arts and music programs are a great way to tie the community to the church. “Everyone is taking part in spiritual songs and worship,” she says. “The songs they sing, the words, they all relate to Jesus and the gospel, and it’s open to anyone.”

Dill, who hails from The Salvation Army in Canada, loves how musicians and artists come as children and are sometimes still performing as seniors. Learning an instrument requires discipline and commitment, which can last a lifetime.

“Music and arts especially really focus on building a skill and empowering a child or young adult to see they’re capable of doing something and growing in Christ,” she says. “When you’re making music and art all together, there’s a huge sense of community that is being built.”

Dill plays in the brass ensemble at the Pittsburgh Temple. She got her start with free lessons at the Yorkminster Citadel in Toronto, Ontario, and says the holiday concerts and other events put on by The Salvation Army glorify God and “speak truth” even to a secular audience.

The Salvation Army is perfectly placed right in the center between faith and music.”

“The lyrics say ‘Jesus loves you. Jesus loves me.’ That’s a strong message and even if the person doesn’t know the lyrics, something spiritual happens,” she says. “The Holy Spirit can move. It can stir someone’s soul without them realizing it. Music can transcend words.”

Nathan Power is director of music in The Salvation Army’s New Jersey Division and says the music kids learn in The Salvation Army is specifically designed to connect with the spiritual. The devotions shared during sessions emphasize that they’re there to learn music but also about the saving power of the Lord.

“I think that’s what makes the difference in these kids’ lives,” Power says. “They pick up the words. They realize it’s not just about Disney or what have you, but there’s more meaning behind the music. As they grow in their faith, they start to make those connections.

“Some of those kids who come from tougher backgrounds, they almost need to hold on to that faith even more, and God uses the music ministry to do that.”

A view from outside

Power, a professional musician who comes from a long line of Salvationist musicians in Ireland, says his parents instilled a love of music in him as he attended and performed in church.

“The Salvation Army really is life-changing in some places, where a kid picks up a pair of drumsticks or a horn and does that instead of going somewhere else and doing a different thing,” he says. “The Salvation Army is perfectly placed right in the center between faith and music.

“We tell them that you can learn a skill and become a musician and learn how to be a team player, and we’ll also help you with the other parts of your life. We invite them to share the faith journey that we have experienced.”

Music can sometimes be a family affair in The Salvation Army. Brindley Venables plays the cornet in the New York Staff Band

alongside his father, Robert. The two also played cornet for many years together in the North York Temple Band in Toronto.

“Having my father there is a big support, and he’s a strong player,” Brindley says.

Robert and his wife, Rhonda, have six children and all of them are engaged in music. His children are the fourth generation in the family of musical Salvationists and lovers of brass banding.

“I’ve seen people come to The Salvation Army, and really what music does is it instills discipline and a sense of belonging,” Brindley says. “In the brass bands, you get an age range that’s massive. You get a 70-year-old sitting beside a 14-year-old, sharing a big sense of community.”

For Robert, the mentoring aspect of Salvation Army banding is key and part of a grand cycle.

“The older players teach the younger ones, and the younger ones come along and take their place,” Robert says. “It’s all because we’re doing it for the love of Jesus and spreading the gospel. It’s not just the love of music, it’s sharing the message through music.

“When you play music at a high level, it’s really special, but to be able to sit next to my son is great. There’s a love for brass bands you have to have. It’s a unique beast.”

Megan Odland, an arts ministry assistant in the USA Eastern Territory’s Arts Ministries Bureau, has seen passion for the arts on full display during her two years with The Salvation Army. She didn’t know much about the organization previously beyond its thrift stores and had no idea about the heavy emphasis on the arts.

“It’s so intentional about the arts as a form of ministry,” she says. “I’ve been impacted by the work The Salvation Army does, with dance and music and theater.

“It’s really cool to see these kids growing up in The Salvation Army, exploring their faith and being mentored and encouraged to know that their art is a form of worship. The kids who have the arts in their lives are very well rounded and learn wonderful

skills—responsibility, organization, and communication—all those things the arts teach you.”

A graduate of Eastern University, where she studied music and theater, Odland began to see God’s work through the arts when she witnessed vulnerable individuals from a Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center (ARC) enjoying a show.

“Seeing the men from the ARC respond was really powerful,” she says. “For me, theater is about authentically representing the human experience. When that is being responded to in faith, and there’s open discussions and conversations about a piece of art specifically meant to glorify God and to bring people to Christ and bring restoration, it’s really cool to see that.”

Ministry beyond words

Captain Jeffrey Brunelle of the Adult Rehabilitation Center in Worcester, Mass., invited the Arts Ministries Bureau’s RePlay Theater ensemble to perform after seeing the group at a retreat. The actors listened to and then dramatized stories shared by the ARC men and women, who were disarmed by the art form.

“Many of our people really opened up. It helped them express some things they had experienced in a way they had never seen before,” Brunelle says. “People were opening up and sharing deep things that maybe they’d never felt comfortable to share. They had an opportunity to have their life depicted in art, and most people found it very refreshing, very healing, and they felt seen, heard, and understood in ways they probably hadn’t experienced much before.”

To Higgins, the arts are “the clearest way to paint a picture of Jesus.” Jesus Theatre, performed at many Salvation Army summer camps, has changed countless lives.

“There’s thousands of kids every year giving their lives to Jesus and having encounters with Jesus because we’re using music and movement to communicate a story,” she says. “We can identify with the story. I can’t put into words how effective this is.”