

ESSAY

Kensington school program has kids rocking toward a musical future

By Rick Gabe · April 22, 2017



Over the last four years, siblings Alexis Arthur, 16, and Eugene Arthur, 13, have made meteoric strides in the [MusiCore](#) after-school music program at [Rock to the Future](#) (RTTF) in Philadelphia's Kensington neighborhood.

They arrived here together in 2012 as musical novices, but they would soon become multi-instrumentalists who would compose music, and record it in a studio, and slowly develop a comfort level on stage as pop music performers — at venues such as the Kimmel Center and World Cafe Live.

These are noble accomplishments for two shy kids who arrived in a foreign environment, and with everything to learn about their vast musical abilities.

A beacon to underserved youth

Alexus plays piano and has quickly evolved as a singer, though she spent the first year playing guitar. Eugene, a sixth grader, played drums his first two years but has played bass the last two years.

“Alexus and Eugene had the tendency to be shy, but RTTF gave them the ability to trust,” said the pair’s mom, Judy Wideman. “They really came out of their shell soon after attending RTTF. They interact with other children so much better, and they both talk more and speak up more since they came here. The students and staff here are like family to Alexus and Eugene.”

RTTF was founded in 2010 by husband and wife Jessica and Josh Craft. Jessica dropped her full-time corporate gig, while Josh streamlined his music-instruction work, so that the two could dedicate their energy and passion to the growth of the burgeoning nonprofit music program. Jessica and Josh began without significant funding — by small nonprofit standards — in a venture that could be seen as a major risk by any measure. These two are determined visionaries, without question.

RTTF fills a major need in Philadelphia as a cultural refuge and a beacon to underserved youth ages 8 to 18. The program is tuition free to the families who would otherwise not be able to afford music lessons. The school is housed within spacious St. Michael’s Church at Cumberland and Trenton streets in Kensington. The music focus is contemporary rock, pop, hip hop, R&B, metal, and punk.

During the summer of 2016, then 15-year-old Alexus made her first trip away from her Northeast Philadelphia home. This was not the typical youth summer trip: Alexus and the house band (the RTTF high-school-aged group) were to perform at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Not many kids can claim the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as a performance venue at such a young age.

The Jackson 5 song “I Want You back” was among the songs she performed. “Everyone in the crowd was dancing and singing,” said Alexus.

The kids and staff travelled like rock stars — in the RTTF van. Free time meant the kids went to the movies in Cleveland, and even cooked their own meals in the home that they shared. So this was a unique pilgrimage that taught the benefit of dedication to a craft as they built relationships and lasting memories.

Musical encouragement

Judy surrounded her children with music from the time of their infancy. As a child, Alexis sang out often in the living room. Alexis' mom was struck by her daughter's vocal ability. Then at the urging of her sister, whose nephew had also studied at RTTF, Judy enrolled Alexis and Eugene in 2012.

“As children, the more Alexis sang, the more Eugene wanted music involvement,” Judy said. “Alexis is particularly quick to sing in front of crowds, and she never would have done that before her RTTF experience.”

Beyond music instruction, RTTF staff act as academic tutors for a portion of the nearly three hours students spend at the school each weekday.

“I'm doing better in school and focus better on my homework, and how to do homework, and in getting extra help,” Alexis said.

On a typical day from 3:30 to 6 p.m., students may be immersed in a blend of instrument study, music history, band practice, and academic tutoring.

Since 2012, RTTF students who compose original songs get the unique opportunity to record those songs in a studio in the spring. In April of 2016 the studio location was Drexel University and some of the original songs recorded were written by Alexis and performed by her and her bandmates, which included Eugene on bass and drums.

Alexis recalls that before RTTF she always tried to write songs, but she never finished them. She initially just wrote lyrics, but now she writes complete songs, music and lyrics, on piano.

Alexus' skills and confidence have soared, and one of her short-term musical goals is to audition for the "The Voice." She looks to major in music in college, and then wants to teach music for grades K–8.

As a sixth grader Eugene has plenty of music yet to make at RTTF; and he sees himself as an electronic game creator some day.

The importance of music in schools really strikes a chord with Judy. She feels she is passing on the musical gifts to her children that her parents instilled in her as a child.

"There is definitely genuine help for children through programs such as RTTF. Parents need to realize how important music is — and how it relaxes the mind and soul," she said.

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Rick Gabe is a Philadelphia-based marketing professional and writer. His work has appeared within news, arts, finance, and health & wellness publications.

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