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MIAMI-DADE

## American Children's Orchestra for peace teaches music to at-risk kids

THE AMERICAN CHILDREN'S ORCHESTRA FOR PEACE IS TEACHING CHILDREN NOT ONLY HOW TO PLAY AN INSTRUMENT, BUT IS GIVING THEM FOCUS AND A CREATIVE OUTLET

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BY SALVATORE FAZIO  
SOUTH FLORIDA NEWS SERVICE

Marian Paula Chacon, 5, sat graciously in a classroom with a fipple-flute recorder on hand, as she and 14 other young music students learned to read music and play songs in Little Havana's José

Martí Park.

Her mother, Laura Rodriguez, 47, watched proudly as her daughter, a student at Riverside Elementary, sang, clapped and played her recorder.

"She is growing in a correct pathway with music," Rodriguez said. "It's something that is good for her."

The American Children's Orchestra For Peace offers musical education as well as a safe environment at no cost for underprivileged, disabled and at-risk children throughout Miami-Dade County.

By providing the tools for a start in a music career, the organization's main focus is to keep children in a supervised classroom environment, said Maida Santander, 68, co-founder and president of the ACOP.

"These children are not in the streets, or left at home unattended. They are in a violence-free environment, learning music and communicating with other children," she said.

Sponsored mainly by The Children's Trust, ACOP has been working with several elementary schools and parks countywide since 2005. It had approximately 1,200 prospective students this year, 900 of whom are regular attendees.

"We try to get as many children into the program as we can," Santander said.

The program works mostly as an after-school activity for students within a network of Miami-Dade elementary schools -- though this structure has been an impediment for children who would like to continue playing after elementary school.

"By the time children finish elementary school, they will have learned to play an instrument for one or two years before they go to a different school, and lose the opportunity to keep learning," she said.

ACOP now has a branch at José Martí Park that accommodates students from different schools and areas around the county.

Santander said ACOP is working to form additional orchestras in parks in Little Haiti and Hialeah.

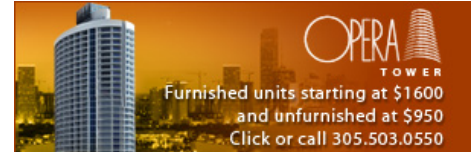
Prospective students can choose among three orchestras. In the Classical Orchestra, they learn instruments such as the violin, viola, cello and piano. The Latin Orchestra includes drums, congas, bongos, timbales and maracas. Children also can join the ACOP Choir.

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ACOP instructor Fabian Alvarez, 29, who smiled as his students played a cacophonous rendition of *Mary Had A Little Lamb* on their recorders, said teaching music theory and flute for children who have had little musical training is quite rewarding.

"It's amazing to see these children do better and better in every class," he said.

Besides instrument lessons, the students also receive free music theory, history classes and uniforms and sit on sessions in social skills and mentoring.

"Since I've joined the organization four years ago, I've seen that the kids who join the orchestra and attend regularly better their academic and behavioral performance," said ACOP orchestra coordinator Maria Giraldo, 50.

Erica Reina, 15, who attends Coral Gables High School, said learning to play the drums has helped her channel her emotions.

"I like playing drums because I can express myself in many ways," Reina said.

"If I may feel bad or anything, I can always turn to the drums."

Maria Reina, Erica's mother, said her daughter has developed skills that have helped her both at home and in school.

"I feel like she has a deeper desire to learn, and she also seems more alert," she said.



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