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## **TWIGS gives young artists a head start**

### **TWIGS after-school classes offer city kids free lessons**

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Beatrice Rigby's choice of the flute as an instrument to play in the fourth grade felt as random a selection as what she would eat for lunch that day. But that simple decision to go for the "oooh, shiny" instrument would guide much of the rest of her childhood.

She learned quickly and her music teacher at Cross Country Elementary School suggested she try out for the Baltimore School for the Arts' TWIGS program for young city artists.

The training at TWIGS prepared her for a place at the School for the Arts, and she will graduate today as an experienced musician and will attend Towson University with the goal of being a music teacher.

"If it wasn't for TWIGS I would have tried the flute, but I never would have concentrated on it," Rigby, 17, said. She is not alone.

Forty-two percent of the School for the Arts' graduating class this year participated in TWIGS (To Work in Gaining Skills), a Saturday and after-school program that provides city children with free lessons in music, visual art, dance, theater and stage production. Started by the school in 1983, just two years after it opened, TWIGS now enrolls more than 700 students a year, providing access to the arts that is lacking in many city schools, but also giving the high school a steady stream of well-trained eighth-graders to choose from.

Beatrice's father, Cornel J. Rigby, didn't think anything would come of her TWIGS audition eight years ago, but she was selected. So every Saturday for years, Beatrice and her father would take the bus from their home in Northwest Baltimore to the school in Mount Vernon, where she played in an ensemble and took musicianship classes. Four hours later they would leave, only to return again during the week for a private lesson. For Rigby, an engineer, it meant traveling not just across the city, but into a foreign world of musical notes, auditions and practicing music.

"I don't have any musical talent," he said. "I am not a super-dad. It was an obligation to take her downtown to the weekend classes."

After spending many hours there, he got to know her teachers and other parents. When times were tough, he said, people at the school helped cover the bus fare.

But the flute seemed to stick, even as she moved to Roland Park Middle School. When she had to choose between focusing on math and science and going to Polytechnic Institute, where she also was accepted, or to the School for the Arts, she again chose music.

"It was a big life decision. I said, 'Dad, I am so young to make this decision,' " Rigby said.

After its opening, leaders of the arts school quickly discovered that there weren't enough city children who were receiving training in the arts. If its mission was to be a pre-professional school for the arts that would prepare students to enter the top conservatories of music and colleges of art, dance and theater, it needed students with more than just raw talent.

"We wanted our graduates to be competitive with any in the country. For the most part, you can't pick up an instrument in ninth grade and get there," said Leslie Shepard, director of the school.

So starting TWIGS would allow city students, particularly those who might not have the resources to pay for private lessons, the chance to be on a level playing field when they auditioned as eighth-graders.

Begun for middle school students only, the school now accepts children as young as third grade for dance and fourth and fifth grades for music. After a renovation that last fall added 29,000 square feet of space on Cathedral Street, both the school and the TWIGS program have been able to add students. The goal was to increase the enrollment from 500 to 800 in TWIGS and increase the size of the school from 300 to 375.

In just two years, TWIGS has nearly reached its capacity. This year, 700 students tried out for 300 openings and the program expects to have well over 700 students, including the current crop.

During auditions, said Georgia King, who oversees TWIGS, children arrive with all levels of training. "We are looking for raw talent and we are looking for enthusiasm," she said.

For some students, like saxophonist Thomas Outlen, 17, the TWIGS program was a natural fit. As a fourth-grader at a parochial school in Baltimore, Outlen was playing with the sixth-graders. He entered TWIGS and was immediately comfortable. "It definitely got me on the path to being here [at the school]," Outlen said.

Next year, if he can work out the finances, Outlen will go to Penn State. He is going to study under a professor and saxophonist he met when the man performed at the School for the Arts.

Nicholas Forbes, 18, another student who studied visual arts in TWIGS, said the program gave him self-confidence and allowed him to explore many different media besides the drawing he had done as an elementary school child. His passion now is photography, and he plans to attend the Community College of Baltimore County's Essex campus in the fall.

Shepard said she is hopeful the school system will begin to introduce more arts into the schools, but she said there has been a decline in the number of students who come to the School for the

Arts with any training from their elementary school.

"I am not happy with a lot of schools that don't value the arts or recreation, ... which are very necessary to the development of children," Cornel Rigby said. "The TWIGS program allowed [my daughter] to hone the skill to the quality they were looking for [at the school]. I wasn't financially able to provide ... the hours of musical training."

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