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**Project STEP Honored by First Lady Michelle Obama at the White House**  
*National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award presented Nov. 10*

BOSTON – On Nov. 10 at the White House, First Lady Michelle Obama presented Project STEP (Strings Training and Education Program) with the prestigious National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award.

Chosen from a national pool of more than 350 nominations and 50 finalists, Project STEP is one of 12 programs across the country to receive the award, which is the highest honor for such programs in the United States. The award is administered by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

Programs that receive the award exemplify how arts and humanities programs increase academic achievement, graduation rates, and college enrollment, as well as improve literacy and language abilities, communication and performance skills, and cultural awareness.

"Playing classical music teaches Project STEP students about discipline, commitment, and attention to detail, empowering them to become astute citizens of the world," says Mary Jaffee, Project STEP executive director. "More than anything, it teaches them to achieve their greatness."

Project STEP was recognized for its rigorous, comprehensive year-round classical string training program for minorities that invites them into the world of classical music, from which they have traditionally been excluded.

Prompted by concern over the historic underrepresentation of minority classical musicians, Project STEP was founded in 1982 by William Moyer, a now retired Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) personnel manager. As the first program of its kind, STEP's founders have assisted other organizations nationwide as they set up similar programs. As of 2012, just five percent of orchestra musicians in the United States are African-American or Latino. Project STEP's mission is to address this imbalance by identifying talented, motivated young minority students and providing them with access to the best training available. As part of its commitment to encouraging musically educated minorities to attend concerts, the BSO offers tickets to Project STEP families, providing them with an opportunity to listen to high-quality classical music. The BSO also provides office and performance space to Project STEP.

Jaffee accepted the award along with student Ajani Boyd, 11, of Dorchester who is a gifted musician and student. He is a seventh grader at Boston Latin School, ranked number one of 27 high schools in the Boston Public School System. "I love playing the bass," Boyd says. "It's big, loud and cool," he says. "What I love most about Project STEP is that the teachers were once students and they show me that musicians can make a living." Boyd balances schoolwork in addition to countless hours of music lessons during the week and all day every Saturday at Project STEP.

"I am extremely proud to see Project STEP receive the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award," says Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh. "By targeting and serving populations that have been typically underrepresented in classical music, Project STEP is evening the playing field, changing lives, and showcasing the great talent of our children. I am thrilled to see them recognized on a national level and offer my sincerest congratulations and wishes for continued success."

Annually, Project STEP's 44 students receive private, weekly one-hour music lessons as well as theory and/or solfege classes by the finest teachers from the New England Conservatory, Boston Symphony Orchestra and Boston University. They are provided with instruments and tickets to concerts at Boston's prestigious concert halls and they actively participate in chamber music ensembles and orchestras. Students are evaluated twice a year, and are required to participate in community service, performances and master classes. The program's retention rate is 98 percent.

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One hundred percent of the students who graduate from the program also graduate from high school and go on to college or conservatory. Project STEP students are recruited into some of the best private high schools in and around Boston. Half of the students go on to study at prestigious conservatories, including The Juilliard School and the New England Conservatory, and the others go on to study music and other disciplines at top tier and Ivy League universities. Sixty percent of graduates are now professionally involved in music, including the New Haven, Oregon, Pacific, San Francisco, Minnesota, and Akron Symphony Orchestras. Others work as music teachers in Boston, New Haven, Philadelphia, North Carolina and Arizona. Several have come back to teach at Project STEP. In addition to music and the arts, alumni have successful careers in medicine, finance, education and architecture.

In addition to receiving the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award, Project STEP will receive \$10,000. For more information about Project STEP, visit [projectstep.org](http://projectstep.org)

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