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West Roxbury, STEP music students honored at White House

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Recently the Boston-based String Training and Education Project (STEP) received the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program (NAHYP) Award at the White House.

Michelle Obama presented the award to STEP during a ceremony at the White House, where West Roxbury Resident Noah Kelly, 15, and Dorchester resident Ajani Boyd, 11, received the award with STEP executive director Mary Jaffee.

"Going to D.C. was just such a huge honor," Kelly said. "This award we won was life-changing for all of us."

Kelly said the ceremony started in the East Room of the White House, and after a speech from the First Lady, was followed by the organization of all the nominees.

"When Project STEP got up I was so happy," he said. "It was really awesome to see this."

The First Lady said she was honored to be in the room with so many people who do as much as they do to help the young people of the United

States.

"All of you are doing the hard work of creating these wonderful programs for our young people every day," she said during the ceremony. "You're out there in the trenches doing the really tough, important and wonderful work and we're all so grateful."

Jaffee said the program is centered on education of young minority students in the classical string instruments, like violin, cello, bass or viola. She said the program started with the Boston Symphony Orchestra back in the '80s.

"It started when the BSO charged its personnel director to find minority musicians to audition for the orchestra," she said. "They really wanted to diversify the makeup of the orchestra. The director said after crisscrossing the country, 'I can't find them, they aren't getting training.' He said if we're serious about this we need to start a program from the bottom up and start training at age five. That was the genesis of the program."

Jaffee said it was a diffi-

cult process for then-director William Moyer to get off the ground, as they had to start very small.

"There aren't many kids who come out of the schools absolutely hell-bent on classical music performance as a career," she said.

Jaffee added she feels musical training is a necessary element of education and should be available to all children.

"Long-term music instruction builds valuable skills that enhance all aspects of life and builds a bridge to achievement," she said. "STEP is a program that's a year-round classical string instrument training program for minority students who are under-represented in the classical music world. Our mission is to correct the imbalance by targeting in [the Boston] area black and Latino students who are interested in music but don't have access to in-depth classical music training."

Jaffee said the NAHYP Award is a one-time deal, and felt amazed and honored that they were selected.

"It was a once -in-a-life-



West Roxbury resident Noah Kelly (middle left) and Dorchester resident Ajani Boyd (middle right) pose with guards in the White House's East Room.

COURTESY PHOTO

time experience," she said. "The whole program went... It was incredibly exciting."

Kelly said he started playing violin "when he was just a little kid."

"My mom thought I had a really good ear," he said. "I heard about the Focus Program, which is the preprogram to Project STEP... It was really important and really fun and all the teachers were amazing. William Thomas, the Artistic Director at STEP, saw me in a Focus class. He

liked the way I played and he knew that I had something... He is definitely the man who changed my life forever."

Though Kelly started with classical music, he said he has branched out to all other kinds of violin or fiddle music since going to a fiddle camp, in which he learned Scottish, Irish and even Uruguayan fiddle playing styles.

"I discovered I was really inspired by all these musicians and I wanted to try something else," he said.