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Potomac Almanac ● Camps & Schools

Students Pursue the Arts with Passion

Duke Ellington in the District attracts students with professional focus.

By Julia O'Donoghue
The Connection

If Tommy Wilson had been a cartoon character, his parents would have been picking his jaw up off the floor as he walked out of theater at Duke Ellington School of the Arts on the evening of Nov. 5.

The eighth grader who attends Saint Mark's School in Vienna had just sat through performances by Ellington's vocal department and orchestra on their Georgetown campus. Teenagers from the D.C. public high school had just run through several pieces from George Gershwin's famous American opera, "Porgy and Bess."

"I have been to a lot of high schools so far and I was just blown away by the performance. I mean, in eight weeks, they can put that on? If you gave my school a decade, we couldn't come close to doing that," said Tommy, who has a passion for the performing arts.

The middle school student has sung with the Children's Chorus of Washington and performed in several theater productions with the McLean Community Players and Elden Street Players.

Tommy lives in the Oakton High School

district but his family has been shopping around for other educational options.

Tommy's mother, Kerry Wilson, is looking for a school with a strong performing arts program that could nurture her son's artistic talent and interests. That is what led them to Ellington for the Friday night student performance. It is the only high school in Metropolitan Washington where the entire student body is enrolled in a "pre-professional" arts curriculum.

"There is really nothing else equivalent to this," said Tommy of Ellington's program.

Ellington students follow their traditional general education classes every school day with three hours of training in dance, instrumental music, theater, vocal music, visual arts, technical design and production, museum studies or literary media and communication.

Students applying to Ellington must audition or submit a portfolio of work directly to one of the school's eight departments. Competition for slots in the school is steep, particularly in departments like theater and vocal arts, where more than 200 people can apply for only a handful of slots.

Last year a little over 530 students went

through the initial audition and portfolio review and there were approximately 120 seats available in the freshman class.

Those who make it past the audition or portfolio review are required to have a family interview with Ellington staff, to ensure the school is a good fit for the student. With such a specialized curriculum, Ellington also prohibits students from transferring into the school after freshman or sophomore year, so students are forced to make a decision early on in high school about whether they want to take their artistic endeavors that seriously.

"This is a place for kids who need to do this and who couldn't do anything else. Art is definitely not a hobby for our students. It is hard work, even when they are in a department that they love," said Barbara Power, head of Ellington admissions.

FOR MANY, a Fairfax County family that would consider sending their child to a D.C. public school over Oakton would seem ludicrous enough.

Oakton is one of the highest-achieving high schools in one of the country's highest achieving school districts. Ellington, on the other hand, admits on

its Web site that some of its students arrive as freshman reading and doing math at an elementary school level.

While Oakton offers about 30 Advanced Placement courses — which can earn students college credit and are frequently a boost to students' college applications — Ellington offers only eight, about half of which are specific to the visual arts or music theory.

"Art is definitely not a hobby for our students. It is hard work, even when they are in a department that they love."

— Barbara Power, Duke Ellington admissions

The D.C. public high school teaches no Advanced Placement math courses at all, according to the classes listed on its Web site.

Still, about four percent of Ellington's approximately 420 students live in Virginia and six percent live in Maryland.

Those parents have not only chosen D.C. Public Schools over better-regarded public and private options but also pay about \$10,400 in out-of-state school tuition every year to send their child to Ellington.

"Artistically, it is the best. You get things here that you can't get at any other schools in the area. There is nothing like this in Northern Virginia," said Laurie Cook, a McLean resident who is head of Ellington's instrumental music group in the Parent Teacher Association.

COOK'S SON Colin, a junior, is in his second year at Ellington after attending elementary and middle school at the private Flint Hill School in Oakton, and freshman year of high school at the local public high school, Langley in McLean.

When it became obvious Colin wanted to pursue a career in music in ninth grade, Cook started looking at more rigorous music program options.

She and her husband even considered sending their son to boarding school at one point, when the local options appeared to be limited. At the time, the couple had reservations about the D.C.

Public School system.

But Cook decided to give Ellington a chance after the Flint Hill fine arts director and others raved about the quality of the music instruction. A site visit only confirmed that Ellington was the right place for her son.

The arts school was certainly a departure from what her son was used to at Langley, a school where the 2,060 student body was just over 73 percent Caucasian and less than one percent of the students came from low-income households the year Colin attended. Ellington, by contrast, has only 470 students, approximately 9 percent Caucasian and 85 percent African American. At Ellington, about one-third of students are considered "economically disadvantaged" by the D.C. Public School system.

But Cook's son had never felt so comfortable anywhere else from the moment he walked through the door.

"When Colin and I walked into this school for the first time, I won't forget it. He turned to me and said 'This is where I need to be. These kids speak my language,'" said Cook.

Colin is not the only Fairfax County teenager to have that reaction when visiting Ellington.

Becky Stewart's son Jonathan called Ellington "a haven of like-minded people," the first time the family visited the campus at the end of last year.

Jonathan had spent his entire freshman year of high school begging his mother to let him apply to Ellington. Up until that point, Jonathan had only attended private schools, Herndon's Nysmith School for the Gifted through elementary school and St. Andrew's Episcopal Day School in Potomac, for middle school and ninth grade.

Becky Stewart finally caved and said that she would visit Ellington if Jonathan could manage to get an audition last spring. When Jonathan, who plays the upright bass, was accepted to Ellington, Stewart was still very skeptical about letting him transfer to the school, until her visit.

"All the kids just seemed so happy. There is three hours of instruction every day so you know every child that goes to school here wants to go to school here," said Stewart, whose son started at Ellington as sophomore this fall. The Stewarts live in Herndon.

But this is not just about Jonathan or

Colin's happiness. Both students and their families said the quality of music instruction and guidance they receive at Ellington is head and shoulders above what they got at their previous high schools or through private instruction.

"My [musical] prowess has probably doubled in the short time that I have been here," said Jonathan.

STEWART AND COOK both admit that Ellington might lack in academic rigor in traditional subjects but the public high school is the arts equivalent of attending Thomas Jefferson School for Science and Technology when it comes to placement in the country's top conservatory or fine arts programs.

Approximately 95 percent of Ellington's graduates go on to a post-secondary education at either a college or a conservatory and many others, particularly dancers, are hired directly by professional ensembles. Currently, the school has former students at most of the country's top arts programs including those at Yale University, New York University, Harvard University, The Juilliard School, Smith College, Parsons School of Design and Pratt Institute.

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Every year between Christmas and New Year's, the Potomac Almanac turns its pages over to the contributions of local students. We are seeking artwork, photography, poetry, opinions, short stories and reflections. We welcome contributions from public schools, private schools and students who are home schooled.

E-mail to: PhotoP@connectionnews papers.com, or mail or deliver contributions by Dec. 4, to 1606 King St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Please be sure to include the student's name, age, grade, school and town of residence along with each submission. For information, call 703-778-9410.

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● School Notes

To have an item listed mail to almanac@connectionnewspapers.com. Deadline is Thursday at noon for the following week’s paper. Call 703-778-9412



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Billie-Jean Bensen, principal of Herbert Hoover Middle School in Potomac, is the winner of this year’s Mark Mann Excellence and Harmony Award. Montgomery County Public Schools gives the award annually to an administrator who has shown an exceptional ability to encourage academic excellence, positive human relations, and strong community outreach. The award is named in honor of Dr. Mark Mann, former principal of Parkland Junior High School, who died in 1988.

Superintendent Jerry D. West presented the award at an Oct. 21 meeting of MCPS administrators and supervisors.

Staff and parents who nominated Bensen for the award praised her as a “21st century leader who realizes that developing and maintaining positive relationships with every student, staff member, and parent is integral to student success.” She is noted for digging deep into student data in order to focus instruction on the needs of individual students.

Norwood School, a K-8 coeducational, independent school, appears on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s new Top 20 K-12 Schools list of the largest green power purchasers among primary and secondary schools.

The Top 20 K-12 Schools List, which debuted on Oct. 26, is one of 10 Top Partner Lists that EPA releases quarterly, highlighting some of America’s largest green power purchasers. Norwood School currently ranks No. 7 on EPA’s Top 20 K-12 Schools list. All of EPA’s Top

Partner Lists are available at <http://www.epa.gov/greenpower/toplists/>.

Tendai A. M’ndange-Pfupfu of Potomac is enrolled at Colby College in Waterville, Maine, this fall. Before classes began, each student took part in an orientation that included an introduction to Colby’s rigorous academics, rich cultural life, and community involvement opportunities as well as a three-day outdoor excursion. **Tendai A. M’ndange-Pfupfu** is a graduate of Sidwell Friends School and the son of Tamburai M’ndange-Pfupfu and Laura Rubinstein of Potomac.

Boston University awarded academic degrees to 1,603 students in September 2009. Receiving degrees from Potomac were **Aditya S. Banerjee**, Bachelor of Arts in International Relations; and **Alex H. Kao**, Bachelor of Arts in Psychology. Receiving degrees from Bethesda were **Daniel S. Dahlman**, Bachelor of Science in Communication, Cum Laude; and **Yasmine Basseghi**, Doctor of Dental Medicine in Dentistry.

Nov. 27 – Dec. 31

“The Nutcracker”

Tchaikovsky’s musical adaptation of the E. T. A. Hoffman story is brought to life by the magic of The Puppet Co. “The Nutcracker” is the festive story of Clara-Marie’s adventures with her favorite toy. 50 minutes. Age recommendation: K-Adult. Performances on Thursdays and

Fridays at 10 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. and on Saturdays and Sundays at 11:30 a.m. and 1 p.m. Tickets, \$10; group rates available. Call 301-634-5380 or visit www.thepuppetco.org.

“Tiny Tots”

Wednesday, Dec. 2

“Nutcracker Fantasy”

Saturday, Dec. 5

“Penguin’s Playground”

Saturday, Dec. 19

“Nutcracker Fantasy”

Saturday, Jan. 2

“Snow Show”

Sunday, Jan. 3

“Winter Wonderland”

The Puppet Co. presents “Tiny Tots @ 10,” a program designed for youngest theater patrons (ages 0 - 4). The shows are shorter, the lights stay on, the doors stay open and the show is set up on the floor.

Performances on select Wednesdays and Saturdays each month at 10 a.m. Tickets, \$5, adults and children (including babies). Reservations strongly recommended. Call 301-634-5380 visit www.thepuppetco.org.

Adventure Theatre continues its literary series with seven popular children’s book adaptations. Experience the journey from reading the books at home to seeing the plays unfold before your eyes. Book Club performances are always on **Sundays at 1:30 p.m.** at the theatre in Glen Echo Park. Recommended for children ages 4 and up. \$10/family. Call 301-634-2270 or visit www.adventuretheatre.org.