ANNUAL REPORT FEATURE | REGENT PARK SCHOOL OF MUSIC

Changing Lives Through Music for 20 Years

From a church basement to more than a thousand students across Toronto, the Regent Park School of Music has spent two decades building confidence, community and futures.

By Leanne Beattie

Twenty years ago, something special began. Thanks to the generosity of Father Tom Day, students streamed down the stairs to the basement of St. Paul's Basilica on Power Street for their first music lessons. Some were boisterous. Some were quiet and reserved. But each one of those students was about to experience something amazing. From those humble beginnings on May 1, 1999, the Regent Park School of Music (RPSM) has gone on to impact thousands of lives.

20	1,000+	80	$321K
years of changing lives through music	students from across the city	teachers and mentors	raised at Crescendo 2019

A challenging environment

The Regent Park area has well-known challenges with poverty and violence, and many children lack the opportunities available in other parts of the city. It's a high-risk, densely populated area where crime is common. But right from the beginning, the RPSM has offered students a different path in a safe and friendly environment. Music lessons are fun, and provide discipline, inspire creativity, and improve focus. Coming to the RPSM provides new experiences that open minds and raise aspirations. The school's music faculty are highly trained professionals who know how to connect with children, and their devotion to each student creates a magic that shines through at every RPSM performance.

The Minstrel Foundation for Music and Arts Advancement

The RPSM wouldn't be here today without dedicated fundraising efforts right from the beginning. Under the guidance of Judith Hinchman, the Minstrel Foundation for Music and Arts Advancement was created to raise money for the school, and Judith went on to become the first Board Chair and President of the RPSM.

Moving to our own space

The school was fortunate to have the generous donation of office, rehearsal, and performance space at St. Paul's. This allowed our early Board of Directors to focus most of the operational budget on the curriculum, additional programming, teaching salaries, and instrument purchases. However, with a growing number of students and a long waiting list too, it was clear that the school needed its own space.

In 2001, the school moved into a new location at 534 Queen Street East, a comfortable rowhouse with a homelike feel. Having its own space gave the school the opportunity to grow even more, and by 2002 there were 130 students from 92 families taking a variety of private and group music lessons throughout the week and on Saturdays.

Fundraising opportunities soon moved in-house, including the annual Closer to the Heart concert. This popular event featured musical performers such as Sarah Harmer, Danny Michel, and Ed Robertson covering songs from other well-known Canadian musicians and continued for many years. Now, we have Crescendo, our immensely successful annual benefit, which raised an incredible $321,000 for the school in 2019.

The positive impact of music

By providing a variety of musical instrument instruction and enrichment opportunities, RPSM was making a 10-year commitment to each child who walked through the door. By 2003, the school was already starting to see recent RPSM graduates moving on to post-secondary education — clear evidence that the music program had been a positive influence on students' lives.

Overcoming our challenges

While RPSM has been a great success, the school has faced its share of challenges too. In late 2003, funding was well below expectations and the Board of Directors had tough decisions to make to ensure the school's financial security. Many people took up the challenge, with teachers giving their time at no cost to allow children to continue with their musical studies. Some of those teachers also reached out to corporations, and businesses such as Sun Life Financial and Scotiabank quickly contributed. The school also received many incredibly generous donations from private individuals. Fantastic media coverage from journalist JoJo Chintoh and his colleagues at Citytv prompted a tremendous public response from people who believed in what the school was all about.

This generosity allowed the school to form the Regent Park School of Music Foundation and create a financial cushion to ensure the long-term survival and growth of the school. Today, the RPSM Foundation continues to raise funds for the school in many creative ways.

For example, Make Me a Song brings in several composer-lyricists from musical theatre to work with the school, and the choir performs the new, original music. The choir professionally recorded five songs this year and money raised from sales of the EP goes to the school. Save Haven, one of these songs, illustrates the positive impact the school has had on the Regent Park area.

Another powerful collaboration recently took place with Frank Dukes, a well-known music producer from Los Angeles. Dukes composed original music for his Parkscapes album, which was then performed by RPSM students. This music can now be sampled and chopped into beats by other producers. Parkscapes will be added to his Kingsway Music Library with all proceeds from purchases and licensing going back to RPSM.

Continued growth and opportunity

In 2012, the school moved into the brand-new Daniels Spectrum, a bright community arts hub at 585 Dundas Street East with room for practices, performances, and events. Having this positive space has allowed the school to grow and flourish even more, and today there are over a thousand students from across the city taking lessons.

Part of this growth has included expansion into the Jane & Finch neighbourhood, where classes are held at several area schools. Students can choose from several group classes with up to five students, or larger ensembles of 10–30 students where they learn important musicianship skills like listening and reading music. Advanced students may be considered for a limited number of private lessons, offered at the school's discretion. Children taking group or private lessons are encouraged to also join an ensemble to give them a full, well-rounded experience.

Classes range from early childhood music with play, dance and singing for Junior and Senior Kindergarten students all the way to Grade 12 group classes for piano and guitar. There are many ensemble opportunities, including choir, piano skills, and ukulele techniques. There's even a rock band ensemble, as well as a music technology lab where students use computers and iPads to understand, explore, and create music. A weekly drop-in program at Westview Centennial Secondary School gives high school students the opportunity to jam on the piano and improve their keyboard skills.

MILESTONES

1999	First lessons in the basement of St. Paul's Basilica on May 1
2001	Moves into its own home at 534 Queen Street East
2002	130 students from 92 families
2003	First graduates head to post-secondary; RPSM Foundation formed
2012	Moves into the new Daniels Spectrum on Dundas Street East
Today	1,000+ students, including programs in Jane & Finch

Changing families one student at a time

Helping kids thrive through music is what the RPSM is all about, but it's not just the students who benefit — entire families are changed.

Claudia Aenishanslin, whose son Ben graduated from Grade 12 this year, says that he didn't behave before joining the music school, but his years of choir, percussion, and piano studies helped him avoid making bad choices. "There are a lot of downward spiralling influences on our kids. But instead, Ben was singing or playing the drums," says Claudia. "The school gave him confidence in the voice inside him," she continues. "The opportunities Ben had gave him a sense of self-esteem and pride and helped him grow into the person he is today."

Claudia was impressed by the positive energy at RPSM. As a single parent working long hours as an ICU nurse, Claudia was often tired and sometimes felt down, worrying if she was being a good parent. The school was a much-needed source of encouragement for her, and this helped the entire family.

Claudia is very happy that Ben enjoys music and has decided to continue with it, even after graduating from the school. "This is all thanks to the RPSM," says Claudia. "They made it fun and inspired him to believe in his musical abilities."

> *"As I reflect on the impact RPSM has had on our family, it becomes clear to me: we went on a journey together."*
>
> **— Claudia Aenishanslin, parent**

Developing a positive foundation

Learning music has helped many students develop important skills. Guadalupe Fuentes, now 26, began in the group choir in Grade 5 and moved on to private piano lessons where she learned the value of discipline. "Taking lessons gave me a goal to achieve," says Guadalupe. "And reaching that goal was a pat on the back."

Initially prompted by her mother to join the RPSM as a way to keep busy, Guadalupe developed a strong sense of identity from the school, which helped her overcome her shyness. She later attended university and worked at the RPSM front desk to help fund her education. During this time, she learned how paying attention to the students when they came in the door made them feel important. "My time at the RPSM gave me a foundation of helping others," says Guadalupe. "And I use this in my role today at an immigration firm."

Connecting people and communities

Helping others is a recurring theme at the RPSM. Executive Director Richard Marsella understands the school is all about people and community building — it's his job to create the strategic plan that will enable the school to continue long into the future. He's passionate about music education and its impact on the community. "Music is the magic tool connecting people and communities," says Richard. "It's constant exploration, a sort of choose your own adventure."

Richard knows the RPSM is changing the game in parts of the city that need the most help. “It’s undeniably incredible what’s happening,” he says. “We’re building trust in the Jane & Finch area by listening to the community and giving them respect. We have a great momentum there.”

As the RPSM continues to grow and reach more people, part of Richard’s leadership includes making sure the school’s 80 teachers have the tools they need to succeed. This means professional development is essential, especially when faced with the trauma that can occur in low-income areas. “There are a lot of challenges in the community,” Richard says. “Our teachers need to learn how to handle this, so they can continue to be long-term mentors to our students. And our students are resilient — we’re actually saving lives here.”

LOOKING AHEAD

“Music is the magic tool connecting people and communities.”

— Richard Marsella, Executive Director