



PHOTOS BY JOHN R. BOEHM

During weekly four-hour sessions, young adults ranging from 14 to 26 learned to drum as an ensemble.

# A little art, a lot of power

Can music cure violence? Old Town School, which teaches drumming and poetry in Englewood, thinks so.

**BY LISA BERTAGNOLI • SEPTEMBER 26, 2016**

One afternoon in late July, David Tucker was riding home from work on the 63rd Street bus when a window shattered. “The rumbling of a gun sound” filled the air, says Tucker, 26, who lives in Englewood. He and the other riders scrambled to the floor.

As the passengers waited for police to arrive, Tucker unzipped his backpack, pulled out a notebook and began writing. “Windows get to shatterin’, people get to droppin’ on the floor,” he wrote. “What is this world coming to? What is this world coming to?”

Had the shooting occurred a year ago, Tucker’s reaction would have been to “jump off the bus and find someone,” he says. “I have a hot temper.” He credits his newfound calm to drumming and poetry workshops he took this summer at I Grow Chicago, a nonprofit community center in Englewood.

The workshops “helped me learn how to express myself better and start putting things into words rather than reacting to so many things,” says Tucker, a mentor and maintenance worker at I Grow. “I’m not so much jumping to conclusions now. I think first.”



Robbin Carroll, left, founder of I Grow Chicago, and Bau Graves, executive director of the Old Town School of Folk Music.

The organization behind the workshops is the Old Town School of Folk Music, which has been around for almost 60 years and has hosted performances, music and dance classes at its locations in Lincoln Square and Lincoln Park. Old Town School is putting down roots in Englewood, far from those home bases, for a few reasons.

First, it's a way for the school to "expand into communities we aren't serving as actively now," says board Chair Kish Khemani, a partner at A.T. Kearney in Chicago. "We want to learn to become more of an outreach organization," he says.

Another reason: Its management believes in the transformative power of art. "Participation in cultural life is a birthright," says Bau Graves, an ethnomusicologist and Old Town School's executive director. "The entire project is based around arts as community wellness."

Yet another: The school can afford to branch out. Financially, Old Town School is "in an unbelievable position for a nonprofit," Graves says. Fully 85 percent of its \$13 million budget comes from earned revenue—music and dance classes as well as ticket sales for performances. Its \$17 million building on Lincoln Avenue, opened in 2012, is paid for. The school ended 2015 with \$600,000 in operating income; it didn't have to wait for a grant or funder to underwrite the program in Englewood, which cost about \$50,000.

To get the pilot program started, Uday Joshi, director of engagement and innovation at Old Town School, called several contacts, including Inner-City Muslim Action Network, a Chicago Lawn organization that has a decadelong relationship with the school. Those contacts all mentioned Robbin Carroll, founder of I Grow.

Carroll, a River North resident, founded I Grow four years ago, when she bought a house and applied to buy two vacant lots on the 6400 block of South Honore Street as part of the city's \$1 lot program. The refurbished house is now I Grow's Peace House, where neighborhood residents meet for

## "THE EXPERIENCE IS TRANSFORMATIONAL. WILL THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?"

Dawn Marie Galtier, Voice of the City



Children singing and drumming at I Grow's end-of-camp summer program.

gardening, yoga classes, community engagement and art-expression workshops.

Old Town School's program started in mid-July as part of I Grow Chicago's summer camp. The school hired two Chicago-based artists—Obari Cartman, a West African drummer and psychologist, and Kendria Harris, also known as K Love the Poet—to lead the classes. Thirteen people, ranging in age from 14 to 26, showed up for the first session; sometimes as many as 15 people crowded Peace House for the classes.

During weekly four-hour sessions, they learned to drum on West African dunun, bougarabou and djembe drums furnished by Old Town School. Cartman taught participants how to drum as an ensemble. Harris led sessions in poetry and spoken word, encouraging participants to express feelings via words and powerful voices.

Quentin Mables, an Englewood native and I Grow's co-executive director, saw how the classes transformed participants. "It was a challenge to those guys to make their presence felt, to be heard, to be known," says Mables, 26. The poetry sessions in particular "gave the guys a platform for their voices," he says, "for their demeanor, how they show up in a room—things of that nature."



For Brittany Flournoy, drumming released years of pent-up emotion. “I actually felt relief,” says Flournoy, 19, who lived next door to I Grow and recently relocated to Nauvoo to pursue a cooking career. “I had so much anger, and beating on the drums took all my anger away.”

As participants drummed and wrote and spoke poetry, Old Town School administrators learned a few things as well. “There are a lot of obstacles to be able to do this work on the South Side,” says Joshi, a former senior producer at Washington, D.C.’s Kennedy Center, whom Graves hired nine months ago to lead this type of expansion. “It’s everything from homicide to taking care of brothers and sisters,” he says. The whole point of the pilot program, he says, “was to identify what the obstacles are.”

Eight of the participants were part of the city’s One Summer Chicago job program and were paid a stipend of \$11 an hour. “If they weren’t coming to the music program, they’d have to be at work,” Joshi says. Of the 13 who began the program, seven finished, including five young people and two I Grow mentors. Two left the neighborhood due to traumatic events, one left for college and three others were placed in different programs. The program finished with an Aug. 11 performance at Peace House. About 100 people attended. Joshi calls the pilot a success, so much so that Old Town School hopes to expand it. Expansion would include an after-school program held at I Grow for students from Harper High School; a program associated with Holy Cross Hospital’s community outreach services; and a collaboration with Inner-City Muslim Action Network’s teen program.

Old Town School is looking to spend about \$350,000 on it. The school is budgeting five years out to properly nurture the program. “If you’re involved in



At an end-of-camp program, children, below, are given certificates for “bringing out their superhero.” Young adults, above, participate in poetry and spoken word sessions



community culture activities, it’s not for six months or a year,” Graves says. “Really, it takes decades.”

Andante, not allegro, is indeed the right approach, says Dawn Marie Galtieri, founder and executive/ artistic director at Voice of the City, a community arts alliance in Logan Square. “There’s nothing wrong with moving slowly,” Galtieri says,

noting it has taken 17 years for her to build Voice of the City to a steady 250 participants a year. “In community work, that’s the only way that growth happens effectively.”

She offers another perspective to those who think a few hours of drumming and poetry sounds like a bandage, not a cure. “It’s not about them becoming djembe drummers for life,” she says. Rather, it’s like hearing Bach’s “Goldberg Variations” or seeing the Mona Lisa for the first time; a little art, a lot of power. “The experience is transformational,” Galtieri says. “Will that make a difference and them not pick up a gun? That I can’t say.”

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