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The History of the Jazz Foundation

From: <http://jazzfoundation.org/>

In 1989, Herb Storfer, Dr. Billy Taylor, Ann Ruckert, Cy Blank, James Briggs Murray and Phoebe Jacobs had a simple vision: to create an organization dedicated to preserving the history and future of jazz, and to promote jazz, in all of its shapes and forms, to the public.

Thanks to Jamil Nassar, Jimmy Owens and Vishnu Wood, it was brought to the attention of the group that there was no one out there taking care of the elder jazz musicians in crisis. There were so many without health insurance, pension plans or any savings, since most recordings never paid royalties, just one time buy outs for the one session they did, and not much for that either. The Board soon realized that the most pressing need in the jazz community was to establish emergency help for jazz musicians that had fallen on hard times. They formed a committee to explore this problem and to propose solutions.

In 1991, a fundraiser was organized with the help of Stuart Davis' son, Earl. It featured three great jazz pianists, Dick Hyman, George Shearing, and Dorothy Donegan, and artwork for sale from such renowned artists as Jasper Johns, Robert Motherwell, Stuart Davis, and others. The event raised \$60,000. It enabled the JFA to activate the Jazz Musicians' Emergency Fund (JMEF) early in 1992. The co-founder, Herb Storfer actually ran the organization out of his loft home for ten years, assisting an average of 35 musicians a year. They all knew that they could just drop by Herb's place, and they'd be taken care of. He kept it going with little help, using his own funds most of the time.

In 1994, a momentous thing happened. When Dizzy Gillespie passed, his last request to his doctor, Frank Forte, was that any Jazz musician in need of medical care be allowed to come to Englewood Hospital. Dr. Forte, along with Ellsworth Havens of Englewood Hospital and Medical Center, made it possible to provide needy and qualified jazz musicians with free treatment. Nearly 150 uninsured musicians in crisis, including Teri Thornton, who received free cancer treatment! Others received free operations, hip replacements, prostate cancer treatment and more.

To this day, the greatest Angel, Dr. Frank Forte and his network of pro bono specialists and the Englewood Hospital see hundreds of musicians in medical need without charge, to the tune of \$300,000 a year in free care... Five million dollars in pro bono specialist and hospital care since it began in 1994.

Dr. Forte, and the rest of these Saints; the heads of the Hospital; Douglas Duchak, Jay Nadel, and our very own Mike Pietrowicz, have made it possible to continue. As of today, nearly 1000 musicians have been given free medical care at Englewood Hospital & Medical Center.

Okay, so back to the year 2000- Herb Storfer who co-founded the Jazz Foundation, and his lovely wife Muriel decided to move North and the Jazz Foundation could no longer be run from his loft home on 29th Street. The Foundation was given a one room office in the Local 802 musicians building. We had \$7000 left in the fund, and no one to run the day to day of the Jazz Foundation.

A series of coincidences changed everything. An ad was placed in a social work magazine looking for an executive director.

Wendy Oxenhorn knew nothing about Jazz or the Jazz Foundation. She was not a musician. She started her life in NYC at the age of 10 as a ballerina performing with the New York City Ballet and their school. At age 17, she was told she would never dance again or risk becoming crippled forever. Thinking her life was tragically over, she called a Suicide Hotline.

As it turned out, the 50 year old woman counseling her had more problems than Wendy did, her husband left her for someone in her 20's, so Wendy began to counsel the counselor. Three days later, she ended up working at the Suicide Hotline. That was the beginning of her life in non-profit and cause-related efforts.

In the span of 20 years, she'd founded three charitable organizations, raised a lot of money, helped children of homeless families living in welfare hotels, employed 2000 homeless people starting the first newspaper that was sold by the homeless, STREETNEWS, which gave birth to 150 homeless-sold street papers around the world. As a single parent with 2 kids, she started a volunteer organization; CHILDREN OF SUBSTANCE, for teenagers dealing with drug and alcohol-addicted parents. Her efforts on behalf of the homeless were acknowledged in the NY Times, Wall Street Journal and Herald Tribune. She was even invited to the White House for her efforts. This was all swell, life was full, but nothing replaced her love of dance.

In 1999, another tragedy struck; a great love affair with an Italian composer met with an ending more devastating than the ballet injury. But this time, instead of picking up the phone to call a Suicide Hotline, she picked up a harmonica and began to play the blues, playing the train stations of NYC with an elderly blues man from Mississippi. The blues saved her. She left her day job to play with this master musician who she lovingly referred to as the "Old Man." She had finally found something that could make her fly almost as much as dance. She had found her happiness playing the blues. She got him recorded for the first time and became his business partner. They sold enough CDs each time they played and she was able to quit her day job, play the trains stations at rush hour 4 days a week- (and still be home in time to make dinner for the kids, no sound checks, no late night clubs, no babysitters.)

Unfortunately, the Old Man from Mississippi got himself a girlfriend and she wouldn't let him have a woman in the band! She made him call Wendy and tell her "Baby, you got to go." He later called her from a pay phone, with tears in his voice and said he was so sorry. This was

more tragic than losing the Italian composer-

She was devastated. Losing the music? This was the one thing that allowed her to breathe. Besides, it was now her only income supporting her children. She sat in a cafe wondering how could this happen? While she was sitting there questioning the workings of the Universe, an old friend saw her sitting at the cafe. This person told her of an ad she had seen for someone to run an organization that helped elder jazz musicians. With Wendy's nonprofit background all these years, and her becoming a musician and having taken care of the Old Man for the past year, it did seem like something she might be able to do. And as we have all learned by now, every dark moment is just a hallway to the next road in your life...you know, something happens for some reason that you don't understand but after time passes, you see exactly how it somehow all manages to work out in the end.

Wendy got the position. In August 2000, she was hired as Executive Director and the sole employee. (She still maintains she was the only one who applied for the job.)

When she learned there was only \$7000 left in the fund, she asked if they could do a concert at the Apollo Theater to raise the much needed money. She was told they could not, since she was not a concert producer but mostly, because there was no money to rent the Apollo!

So she went to the newest board member, Jarrett Lilien, who worked at E*TRADE FINANCIAL Corp. and asked him for advice. He said she should give it a try and that he would put the money up to rent the Apollo.

Nine weeks later, the first Annual "Great Night In Harlem" Benefit Concert at the Apollo Theater happened- it was the first concert in 50 years to bring jazz back to the Apollo. It raised \$350,000 and over 65 jazz Legends came out. The house was packed and it happened 13 days after 9/11.

By this time, the emergency caseload had tripled, and they were now helping 150 musician cases. Wendy could no longer manage to do this alone and needed help.

An angel appeared in the form of a young woman named Lauren Roberts. She was 22 and had just graduated from Vassar. As Wendy says, "Lauren was ten women rolled up into one." And together they ran the Jazz Foundation, making the day to day happen, handling an average of 10 cases a day.

Wendy initiated the "Jazz in the Schools" Program and Lauren ran it. Wendy did the social work and the fundraising, while the Jazz in the Schools generated employment for more than 400 elderly musicians in NYC since 9/11. Lauren did everything else.

More and more cases were coming in and the Annual Great Night In Harlem Concert was the only major funding source. Each year it grew, along with the Foundation's caseload.

Then another amazing thing happened. Remember the man who helped us fund the first Apollo "Great Night In Harlem" Concert, Jarrett Lilien? Well that wonderful Soul stepped up to the plate, along with the good folks at E*TRADE FINANCIAL Corp., and they started our very first "Musicians Emergency Housing Fund." We were now able to pay rents and keep mortgages from foreclosure. We were able to be there for hundreds of elderly musicians who had fallen behind due to illness or age, keeping hundreds from eviction and homelessness.

We thought it was a good idea to make this amazing man the Jazz Foundation's president, so we did.

Jarrett Lilien became our first president. Within months, he was also made president of E*TRADE FINANCIAL Corp. (Another interesting coincidence... that changed the lives of hundreds of musicians in crisis.)

With the case load up to 15 cases a day, we hired a young man who was updating our data base and helping Lauren run the office in the many ways that were needed. Dmitry became our Jack of all trades. He also was a great saxophonist from Russia who is making quite a name for himself at night downtown.

The Jazz Foundation had become a national organization helping musicians across the country. With a part-time social worker to help, Valerie Simon joined the staff 3 days a week and we were now handling approximately 500 emergency musician cases a year! Wendy was still putting in 17 hour days, while Lauren was putting in 12 hours days and both were getting very tired. Lauren had been with the Foundation for four years. After some burn out from nonstop efforts, our wonderful Lauren made an application for law school, (just to see if she'd get in.) She wanted to go into entertainment law and help musicians BEFORE they were taken advantage of. Of course, she was accepted.

None of us could have known that two weeks after Lauren left, that Hurricane Katrina would change the face of our world.

After the hurricanes and the flood, Wendy went down to Lafayette. (You can read about and see photos in the "Help New Orleans Now" part of this site.) That trip changed everything.

Upon getting to know the musicians of New Orleans and seeing the desperate need, the Jazz Foundation did what it had been doing all these years; we opened our doors to musicians in crisis.

We were now taking on hundreds of young musicians, many with small children, who had just been displaced and lost everything they had.

We needed another social worker and fast.

Alisa Hafkin, another part-time social worker has come on board and is makes miracles happen every day she is here.

With Lauren gone, Wendy prayed for another Angel who came in the form of a donor. With a one million dollar gift: Our amazing "Saint Agnes" Varis, allowed our dream of applying the same "Jazz in the Schools" employment solution to the Katrina situation. As it had saved hundreds of musicians in NYC after 9/11; and we were able to put hundreds of displaced New Orleans musicians back to work performing in schools and nursing homes in 8 states where there was little or no music jobs in, keeping their music and their hope alive, while passing on the great education. Thank God for Saint Agnes. We have now reached 1000 musicians who benefited from this program.

Since Katrina, with 3 full-time and 4 part-time employees, the Foundation has assisted 3500 emergency cases, saving so many good people in crisis, along with their children and families.

Then Amy Merrill came to us in Feb. 2007 and changed our lives; she handles the front office, does everything plus runs our NYC Jazz in the Schools program making sure elderly musicians have a way to help pay their rent and make their own money, giving them back the purpose in their lives and bringing their music to School children who have no music programs, as well as the elderly in nursing homes, who have little joy, everyone ends up

dancing, even the ones in wheelchairs.

Petr Verner is our logistics genius who helps handle all our events, our data base and IT concerns and the every day to day. He also runs our Agnes Varis Jazz in the Schools Program that has employed 1000 musicians since Katrina, in 8 states.

John Waters, our "musician emergency expert" bringing food, doing shopping for the sick, buying electric heaters in winter and air conditioners in summer to elderly homebound musicians, or just taking time to talk to them, making home visits and escorting them to doctors when needed, has now joined the staff.

New programs are being created, like the "Musicians Legacy Program" where we have the musicians who are homebound or have been ill and can't have perform much anymore: We have connected them with young established musicians who are now getting a free lesson in exchange for the help we give the older musician. So now, a younger musician has a mentor, the mentor has someone to talk to, visit with, who can bring food over, become a friend, shop for them, as well as someone they look forward to seeing each week and who has become like a son or daughter.

The secret of what we do: Is it is all done with "Love."

We try to make it very individual. There is never one solution for everyone. Each life, each person, each emergency is different, and we try to treat everyone like they are family, helping the best way we know how... "one musician at a time."

Over 8 Million dollars has been raised for the Jazz Foundation since the first "Great Night in Harlem Concert." Next concert: May 29 2008 at the Apollo Theater NYC.

As tiring as it is sometimes, always being on call, it is a privilege and an honor to serve this population of people who already spent their lives making the world so beautiful. These are people who always were self-sufficient, worked so hard all their lives and never asked anyone for help, and now find themselves worrying about the very roof over their heads. We just have to make sure that we will always be there for them, for after all, they have always been there for us.

Each of the people we have come to know, are some of the most beautiful, dear and precious souls on Earth. Sometimes you get these "musical thank you" messages on your voice mail, and they expect you to know just who it is... or you get a surprise box of Whitman Chocolate covered Cherries from the Duane Reade drugstore, left on your chair. There was one great composer who was a recluse, he was dying of cancer, never left the house and didn't want to go on medication. He wanted to die at home. His only contact with the outside world was a voice message he'd leave on our machine. He'd just call up, say something profound like; "Life, Death, it's all the same breath..." and then hang up. That's all he needed to "be in touch" and we'd call back and chat and someone listened to him, understood just what he was going through, and he knew we really cared.

And when you think about it, through every life crisis we've ever had, it was music that healed us. Through our most joyous moments, greatest films, our weddings, our breakups, our divorces, the Music has always been there for us all along. And that is why we are here for them.

Thank you for visiting our site and taking the time to care enough.

On behalf of Everyone at the Jazz Foundation, we thank you from our hearts and theirs.

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45 years of ESP

***A benefit concert for the Jazz Foundation in celebration of the artists & music of
ESP-Disk'***

November 8th, 2009

2 - 9:30pm

@ The Bowery Poetry Club

308 Bowery Street

(Between Houston and Bleecker)

F train to 2nd Ave, 6 to Bleecker

212-614-0505

Scheduled performers include:

Guiseppe Logan (ESP [1007](#), [1013](#), [1055](#))

Sonny Simmons (ESP [1030](#), [1043](#), [4012](#))

Alan Sondheim (ESP [1048](#), [1082](#))

Paul Thornton (ESP [1037](#), [1047](#), [1077](#), [2017](#), [3008](#), [3019](#))

Randy Burns (ESP [1039](#), [1089](#), [2007](#))

Kali Fasteau (ESP [3018](#))

Warren Smith (ESP [1054](#), [1069](#))

Joe Morris (ESP [4052](#), [4056](#))

Bruce Eisenbeil's Totem> (ESP [4046](#))

+ many more ESP artists & special guests to be announced

\$20-100 sliding scale

100% of door proceeds go directly to the Jazz Foundation of America

A huge selection of ESP titles will be available on site, along with hundreds of new & used vinyl & CDs selections. ***All profits from CD & record sales for the afternoon go directly to performing artists!***

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