



Bakithi Kumalo plays his bass as he assists students during Lehigh's 2022 Music Master Mentor Program at Zoellner Arts Center.

Bakithi Kumalo Connects Kids Through Music at Zoellner Arts Center

The five-time Grammy winning musician headlined Lehigh's Music Master Mentor Program Summer Camp for 25 local middle and high school students.

Just after lunch midway through their weeklong camp in June, local middle and high school students gathered in groups on the second floor of [Zoellner Arts Center](#) huddled around plain, wood pieces scattered on the ground. Other than the wood clinking together, all that could be heard was the grunting of students as they gestured toward campmates and the pieces. They couldn't speak until the puzzle was solved.

A burst of applause and cheering came from each group as they successfully completed the task.

The exercise was one of numerous team-building activities for 25 area students participating in the 2022 Music Master Mentor Program Summer Camp, which featured famed South African-born musician Bakithi Kumalo, renowned for his bass playing on artist Paul Simon's 1986 *Graceland* album. The program culminated with the students performing a number of songs they learned during the camp. Aside from playing music, students also took part in yoga, a drum circle and theater-related exercises featuring improvisation and storytelling.

Two main goals within the camp, which was presented to participants through the support of Brenda and John McGlade '81 '76G, was getting the students to connect with each other and improvise through music. The team-building activities were not only fun for the students, but helped them achieve those goals.

“The idea was to get them tapping into their creativity in any way that they can in terms of not only individually, but also in a group setting,” June Thomas Fraser, the camp’s musical director, said.

Fraser, a multi-keyboardist/vocalist who has played with regional jazz, blues, and pop artists for over 25 years and a member of the Muhlenberg College Music Department faculty, helped run the program with Kumalo and the camp’s drum instructor, Dan Andree, a Lehigh Valley drum instructor and music education consultant.

“This is not just about learning songs or notes, it's about connecting these kids,” Kumalo said. “Some of them never played together or they don't know each other because they come from different schools. But now they're learning how to communicate through music, which is an amazing thing. That's what we tried to do here with this program—communication, and give them things that they don't get anywhere [else]. When they come here, we're all family. We're all learning together, even though I've been playing for 50 years. I'm here to learn with them.”



Bakithi Kumalo helps one of the 25 students in attendance at Lehigh's 2022 Music Master Mentor Program.

Despite being discovered by Simon and playing with singers and musicians such as Cyndi Lauper, Chaka Khan, Gloria Estefan and Herbie Hancock, among others, Kumalo said he was a bit nervous the night before the camp began. He said he wanted to be sure to connect with the students and have them learn something from him.

Kumalo said he’s focused on teaching the students and giving them opportunities to succeed if they plan to stick with music. It’s also important, he said, for him to share his personal stories, including how staying consistent with music and practicing every day led him to become a performance artist.

While Kumalo is a Grammy-winning musician, he didn’t have his own instrument until he was in his early 20’s. Kumalo said when he joined a band in South Africa instruments were provided, but they weren’t permitted to go home with the members. In order to continue to practice at home, he said he made his own bass out of cardboard using a marker to draw the strings and frets. He said he practiced his fingerings from rehearsals and trained his hand while he sang the baseline.

“The music, it just gave me a chance to see the world,” Kumalo said. “I was discovered by Paul Simon and I didn't even know who Paul Simon was. He gave me a chance to go all over the world with him. ... It's

something that I want them to know that you can go the distance, just think big. If you want to play music, practice, think big.”

Laurans Trinh, a rising junior at Salisbury High School in Salisbury Township, was one of five students who returned to work with Kumalo after attending the initial program at Zoellner in 2020. The [inaugural Music Master Mentor Program](#) was scheduled to be six three-hour Saturday sessions, ending with a concert at Baker Hall, but was cut short after four sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Trinh was able to eventually perform with six other students in the program, [opening for Kumalo at Levitt Pavilion SteelStacks](#) in September 2021.

Trinh said the program means a lot to him because before attending, he “never really knew what jazz truly was.” He believes it has helped him grow exponentially as a musician.

“I became so invested in just trying to do what [the instructors did] through listening and that started me on my journey of jazz music,” Trinh said. “I owe it to this program so much because I learned so much from it.”

All three instructors were pleased with how this year’s program progressed and because the students quickly absorbed the material, two additional songs were added for the group to work through together.

“You never know what to expect, because kids are individuals. It just depends on how the group falls and this particular group, they’re all willing to work together,” Fraser said. “Everybody is so willing to help each other. ... It’s been a pleasure. The vibe is great.”

Kumalo also gave credit to Lehigh and Zoellner for hosting the program and giving the school students this opportunity.

“They understand that the art can change the kids [for the] better and these kids, they love to be here,” Kumalo said.

Kumalo doesn’t intend for his support for the students’ musical path to end with the camp. He said he still has a job after they’re finished this year and that’s to find them venues to perform. He’d like to arrange for them to play at local venues.

“The more they play, the more they get comfortable and they learn more and then they move forward,” Kumalo said. “They’re going to be the next teachers so we have to support them to do that.”



Students in Lehigh's 2022 Music Master Mentor Program pose for a group photo with instructors Dan Andree, Bakithi Kumalo and June Thomas Fraser. (Lenore Pitsilos/Lehigh University)

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