

Local harpist wins \$20,000 NEA grant for work in South Dakota

By CLARISSA MOON

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Dawn Marie Edwards leads a class as part of the "Discovery of Harp and Strings" program at General Beadle Elementary School. Edwards provides year-round instruction to the students at the Title I school. (Courtesy Dawn Marie Edwards)

Local harpist Dawn Marie Edwards of the Bach Festival Orchestra was awarded a \$20,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in April for her work as the artistic and education director for the **Chamber Music Festival of the Black Hills in South Dakota**.

Edwards founded the nonprofit organization in 2008 with her husband Michael Hill — the principal bass of the Orlando Philharmonic and a South Dakota native. The summer festival’s programming includes concerts and free music education for local indigenous and at-risk children.

“The neat thing about it is it places our small festival ... in the top tier of professional arts organizations throughout the country,” Hill said.

Hill, who serves as the festival’s executive director, said it’s rare for an organization of their size to be awarded an NEA grant.

“When you have a much larger organization, you have a much larger administration working on grants and developing these projects,” he said.

“You usually have an artistic team,” Edwards added. “We just have each other.”

For comparison, the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra, which was awarded the same size grant last fall, has a **yearly operating budget** of \$9.7 million. The Chamber Music Festival of the Black Hills has an annual budget of under \$100,000.



Local harpist Dawn Marie Edwards serves as the artistic and education director of the Chamber Music Festival of the Black Hills in South Dakota. The festival is the summer residence of the Orlando Chamber Soloists. (Courtesy Dawn Marie Edwards)

The grant will go toward the organization's operational costs. The nonprofit holds over 50 events within a two-month period, which Edwards pointed out is more than most orchestras with a multi-million-dollar budget.

The festival also provides year-round instruction to students at General Beadle Elementary School. A majority of students at the Title I school are Native American and the turnover rate is 180%, according to Hill and Edwards. Hill said they hope the program will decrease the number of students who drop out.

"Children come in, they register, their parents take them out of school, they re-register, they're taken out of school. It's a rather transient community and we're trying to work hard to give the kids a reason to stay at school ... thus achieving a higher level of education and achieving a higher economic and social standing in the community," Hill said.

The festival's summer educational programming includes "Musical Story Time" for preschoolers, children's concerts for elementary and middle schoolers and masterclasses for older students.



Dawn Marie Edwards (right) leads a children's concert at General Beadle Elementary School in Rapid City, South Dakota as part of the festival's educational programming. (Courtesy Dawn Marie Edwards)

Hill said Edwards' educational programming often incorporates the local heritage and culture, including that of the Lakota tribe. He said this creates a sense of empowerment and self-worth.

"It's trying to get the kids to feel that their culture is positive," Edwards said.

Originally, the grant was awarded for a project involving Lakota culture titled "Dignity, Empowerment of the Female Spirit."

The multi-media project would have used music, dance and lighting to celebrate the female spirit using Lakota culture and values. It also included lesson plans on female empowerment for the festival's educational program. The project was canceled due to COVID-19, so the NEA allowed the grant to be used for operational costs.

Edwards said they'll probably go forward with the project once the pandemic is less of a concern.

"We're revamping it and hoping to implement it next year," Hill said.

Edwards said the festival has expanded as they've found the need within the community.

"It's really come together," Hill said. "It's a matter of us not working separate from the community but within the community."



Clarissa Moon

Orlando Sentinel

CONTACT

Clarissa Moon has worked as a theater journalist in the Orlando area since 2016, writing for publications such as WMFE 90.7 News, Orlando Weekly and BroadwayWorld Orlando, where you can find her video interview series "Clarissa Moon Talks to the Stars." Clarissa will graduate from UCF next spring, where she studies journalism and musical theater.