

Lift Every Voice and Sing

"Mama Vy" Higginsen gives musical children a home in Harlem.

by JENNIFER ABBASI



Sitting down to sip an iced tea at Sylvia's, the famous Harlem eatery, Vy Higginsen exudes motherly warmth. This nurturing energy earned her the nickname Mama Vy from her students, about 300 kids from New York and New Jersey who come to a brownstone down the block every Saturday to learn breathing, harmony, pitch and vocal control, all set to gospel music. Surprisingly, Higginsen doesn't sing. What she does is give a voice to kids who desperately need one through her free Gospel for Teens program.

Her students, 13 to 19 years old, share a love of music but come from varied backgrounds. Some have strong families and middle-class upbringings, while others are making do without parents or financial stability. Violence is a fact of life for some. "The program gives them an opportunity to forget about what they're dealing with at the moment and to do what makes them happy," says Elijah Ahmad Lewis, 19, who joined the inaugural class six years ago and is now a musical director at the school.

That same love of music compelled Higginsen to launch her nonprofit Mama Foundation for the Arts in 1998 to promote



gospel, jazz and rhythm-and-blues music in the community. The foundation grew out of a realization that traditional gospel had been eclipsed by contemporary music and that without intervention, the historic African-American art form would be lost. During auditions for *Mama, I Want to Sing: The Next Generation*, a revival of the 1983 off-Broadway gospel musical that Higginsen produced, directed and co-wrote, she noticed some young performers could not sing famous gospel pieces from memory. "What do you mean, you don't know *Amazing Grace*?" she remembers thinking at the time. "How did that happen?"

"Hip-hop has taken over the musical scene and the minds of our young people," she says. "We want to make sure they have some of this flavoring, some of this seasoning, from the past."

To the 60-something Higginsen, gospel is a part of life, and at first her only philanthropic goal was to preserve the music. She was born into a musical family—her father, Randolph, was a minister, and her two older sisters and brother performed as a singing group in neighborhood churches. In 1963, her sister Doris Troy became an international star with the pop hit *Just One Look*. After college, Higginsen toured Europe with Troy, whose life the musical is based on.

In 1970, after working as *Ebony* magazine's first female ad executive, she landed a gig across the street from Sylvia's at radio station WLIB, where she spun a "total black experience." The first black female radio personality in New York prime time—a barrier she proudly broke down—Higginsen was on the air at different stations in the city for a decade.



Vy Higginsen, far right, makes it possible for New York and New Jersey teens to experience the power of gospel music and know its history.

Jasmine Williams

Later she returned to Europe and visited Japan on tour with *Mama, I Want to Sing*. “I appreciated the culture of Japan, and I appreciated what I saw in Germany and Switzerland and Vienna,” she explains. “Somehow their traditions were sacred, and I didn’t feel that they were this way in New York or America. People took our traditions for granted.”

Not willing to let that history die—and wanting to give something back to the community that had supported her play, which ran eight years—Higginsen first organized classes for adults. There were master classes, in which musical greats such as Mary Wilson of The Supremes spoke about their groundbreaking careers and the history of black music in America. And there were opportunities to belt it out, like the ongoing Wednesday Sings, where men and women—once told they had poor voices and shouldn’t sing—do so for two hours.

The children came in 2006, when Higginsen’s teenage daughter Knoelle, who had grown up singing gospel music, attended a performing arts high school that offered no gospel instruction. Higginsen founded Gospel for Teens as a place where Knoelle and other kids could nurture their creativity and grow their talents.

“I feel this is important for the musical child who might otherwise be ignored and drift off into making bad choices,” she says. Indeed, the benefits of the program extend beyond music. “Parents are seeing behavioral changes in these teenagers,” Higginsen says. “I hear parents say, ‘I like my kid better now that they’re part of this program.’ It not only changes the child, it changes the family.”

Auditions for Gospel for Teens are held twice a year, and *American Idol* it is not—kids only need to carry a tune. After a freshman beginner course and an advanced class, the teens perform at churches, open for *Mama, I Want to Sing*, and make appearances at theaters, nightclubs and civic centers. In February, they performed at the annual TED2012 (Technology, Entertainment and Design) conference.

In 2010 Gospel for Teens sang *Like a Prayer* with Madonna at the Hope for Haiti Now benefit. “The teens found themselves to be in a position to be so blessed as to be in the same room as Jennifer Hudson and some of the biggest stars on the planet, and to be on the same stage as Madonna,” she says.

At first the music was all she cared about, Higginsen says. But harsh realities kept leaking in. In an early class, one student arrived visibly shaken after witnessing the fatal shooting of his friend.

“These people are dealing with life and death at such an early age. I never saw anything like that in my childhood. I couldn’t handle the level of pain I was hearing,” says Higginsen, who doesn’t allow her classes to turn into talk therapy. But outside class, kids can share what’s going on in their lives, and if needed, her staff will refer them to social workers and therapists trained to help. “I felt that if we dealt with the music, some of the other stuff would get taken care of.”

It’s clear that the program has a healing nature. Last year, CBS’s *60 Minutes* profiled Gospel for Teens in an emotional segment that followed the program for a year. Toward the beginning, a shy, nervous teen named Rhonda Rodriguez broke into tears when asked to say her name aloud, an exercise required for every freshman in the program. By the end of the segment, her growing confidence enabled her to shout her name at a live performance.

The music itself deserves some credit, Higginsen says. “[Gospel] music has power. When you mix the music with the right lyrics, something transformative happens. That’s what gospel means to me—being able to sing something from a point in your body that has passion and joy and pain and fear and shame and vulnerability.”

But Higginsen is the main catalyst. Lewis says her strength lies in her ability to communicate with everyone. The way she connects to teenagers “is priceless. Spiritually, physically, mentally, it’s all there. Kids tell us they look forward to being here. Many times during the school year, kids will come by the foundation after school to hang out and talk to her.”

Higginsen and Lewis say programs like theirs are vital as arts budgets are being slashed at schools nationwide. Funding for the program comes from grants, donations and play ticket sales. With enough money, Higginsen will expand Gospel for Teens, starting in places like Philadelphia and Newark, N.J.

Eventually she vows to bring the power of gospel music to teens around the world. “There’s something about the musical child that needs to be seen and heard.” **S**

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