

JEREMY V. JOHNSON ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR

KEYNOTE AND AWARD ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

THE MUSIC SETTLEMENT, SEPTEMBER 18, 2023

To the Board of The Music Settlement, to President and CEO Geri Presti, and to all the supporters and friends of this amazing institution, it is an honor for me to accept the 2023 Advocate of the Year Award.

I accept this award wearing a couple of hats. First, it's my honor to lead Assembly for the Arts, an umbrella arts council that is advocating for all of the arts and culture sector—our broad mission is two-pronged: to expand the pie of resources for the sector, and to increase the equity within that sector.

Secondly, I wear the hat as a fellow music lover and former student of the Settlement's instruction.

The start of my life as an arts advocate is connected to my early connection to what was then known as the Cleveland Music School Settlement. When I was in second grade, my family moved from Youngstown to Cleveland's Hough neighborhood. My dad had died prematurely, and with his insurance, my mom purchased an upright piano. The Hough neighborhood, just a few years after the infamous uprisings or riots, was hardscrabble. But for my Mom one of its biggest benefits was its proximity to the cultural treasures of University Circle. Before you knew it, I was enrolled in deeply discounted piano lessons on sunny Saturdays at the Cleveland Music School Settlement. I was a scrawny, nerdy, new kid on the block, walking the near mile from E. 90<sup>th</sup> St to Magnolia Dr. While en route, sometimes I was a target for the neighborhood bullies looking to stem their boredom by picking on the kid carrying books on the weekend. I quickly learned to hide my yellow Schirmer edition scores under my shirt so as not to attract too much attention.

But the trek from Hough to Magnolia Dr. was well worth it. I had a firm but compelling piano teacher—his name was Mr. Sven. What I most remember about the lessons was how much they challenged me.

They pushed me beyond my comfort level and inspired discipline and reward. I wish I could say that I continued with Mr. Sven and became an all-star performer. Alas, our family around Cleveland a few times—further afield from the Music Settlement. It was too difficult, too far. Mom was working and finances were thin, a stepfather, a new baby brother and sister enlarged the family. So I had to mostly practice on my own, and became an amateur player, even playing for our church's junior choir.

So why is this decades-old story relevant to me today, and relevant to The Music Settlement in 2023?

It bears repeating, over and over, that often the most important influences in a young person's life is the discipline and adult guidance. Someone who gently but also firmly pushes that young person to seek out a goal and achieve it. The goal could be as rudimentary as getting the fingering right on the first few measures of a sonata by Mozart.

We have a great city and region, renown for some of the country's most revered cultural institutions. We also have a city that still struggles against poverty, education and income gaps. It truly makes a difference when The Music Settlement is in our neighborhoods, connecting people of all ages, but especially our youth with inspiring instructors to give them confidence to set and reach goals. That will set them for success later in life.

When I returned to Cleveland two years ago to lead Assembly for the Arts, I was delighted to see a reimagined Cleveland. Among its reimagined assets, were The Music Settlement, still ensconced in University Circle on the east side, but with a outposts on the West Side as well.

What makes me smile is to know that The Music Settlement continues to offer high quality arts instruction to the young people of greater Cleveland in established and growing neighborhoods. We need you. Cleveland needs you.

Why do we need The Music Settlement? Because there's a lot at stake for our residents, families, and the future leaders of our communities. Hardly a week goes by without an article talking about how our region is lagging, how we need to up our educational game, how we need to graduate a highly educated workforce that lifts the income for our area, that raises the quality of life for our area, and that makes northeastern Ohio a diverse and prosperous region where people WANT to be, where they want to live, learn, play, and grow.

The Music Settlement plays a pivotal role in Cleveland's ability to achieve these qualities. Our region's arts and culture bona fides are unquestionable. Prior to the pandemic, research that Assembly for the Arts, via our friends at Creative Ohio, showed the arts and culture industry in northeast Ohio contributed \$9.1B (that's billion with a 'B') to the economy. It accounted for some 55,000 jobs.

What's lost in those giant numbers are the impact of an institution like The Music Settlement. What makes a neighborhood worth staying in? What turns on a youngster to being a part of the vast arts and culture ecosystem that is vibrant here? What attracts an adult back to the practice room to pick up an instrument? Is there a connection between the discipline of arts mastery and innovation in science and technology? What about the research that underscores the power of arts learning in the brain development of toddlers and pre-schoolers? You already know this- The Music Settlement's Early Childhood program offers an arts-infused curriculum that fosters brain and social development, builds confidence, encourages creative expression, and promotes play. A stronger workforce begins with investment in our youngest learners—and that's what we're seeing at the Music Settlement.

Last week, my colleagues at Americans for the Arts, our leading national arts advocacy organization, just celebrated "National Arts in Education Week." Here's what I learned from them about arts education, and here's why The Music Settlement is so vital to greater Cleveland's arts and culture ecosystem.

- 91% of Americans believe that the arts are vital to providing a well-rounded education.
- Arts education positively impacts students' lives in and out of the classroom.
- Arts education helps students develop social-emotional and interpersonal skills.
- The arts help people succeed,
- Low-income students who are highly engaged in the arts are more than twice as likely to graduate college than their peers with no arts education

So with all that, I'd like to say thank you for being a driver and leader in these arts education attributes. Thank you to The Music Settlement for being a beacon, for our young people, for our communities, and for all of greater Cleveland.

Thank you very much!