

Azira G. Hill and  
Allison Vulgamore  
(left to right).



*‘Leave it  
better  
than you  
found it’*

**An appreciation of  
Mrs. Azira G. Hill  
— and the Talent  
Development  
Program she founded  
15 years ago —  
by a former  
TDP student-musician**

BY STANFORD THOMPSON

**T**he most indispensable advice that Mrs. Azira G. Hill received from her mother was, “Leave it better than you found it.” In a life dedicated to helping young minority student-musicians make inroads into the rarified world of classical music, Mrs. Hill has taken her mother’s advice to unprecedented heights. Following her recent appointment as an ASO Life Director, she was honored at this month’s Symphony Ball.

Azira G. Hill was born into a large family with eight siblings and grew up in Cuba. Her seven brothers were musicians and they exposed her to all different styles of music. Hill’s appreciation for music encouraged her daughter to study the violin and later join the Atlanta Symphony Youth Orchestra.

Hill’s ASO career formally began when she was invited to become a member of the Orchestra’s Audience Development committee, which instituted the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration concert and the ASO Talent Development Program (TDP).

L.C. KELLEY

In 1993, over 100 students across the city of Atlanta auditioned and 10 were chosen to start the TDP. “We never knew that we would find great diamonds!” said Hill. She had no idea how much these diamonds would be worth 15 years later.

I was eight years old when my father introduced me to music with an extra trumpet he had from the closet of his middle school band room. My seven siblings all played musical instruments and my mother taught high school orchestra: We were expected to become proficient. We frequently attended ASO concerts, and one evening in 2000 made an indelible impression on me. During *Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition* I could hear and feel trumpeter Mark Hughes’ breath as he prepared to lead the entire orchestra through the famous procession. That’s when I decided to become an orchestral trumpeter.

I soon met Christopher Martin, who had just assumed the role of ASO Principal Trumpet. After his first concert, I went backstage and introduced myself, and within a week he agreed to teach me on a weekly basis through the TDP.

The previous summer, my older brother Eric completed his second year and was TDP’s first student to be accepted — with the assistance of Principal Bass Ralph Jones — at the prestigious summer arts camp Interlochen.

Mrs. Hill wanted more students to have these special opportunities and created the Azira G. Hill Scholarship Fund to help TDP families afford the cost.

Thanks to the scholarship, my parents were able to send me to Interlochen for the next four summers.



**Stanford  
Thompson**

The happiest day of my life was in the spring of 2005 when I answered my cell and heard, “Is this Stanford Thompson? This is Gary Graffman from The Curtis Institute of Music, and I would like to welcome you to Curtis.”

If it were not for Azira G. Hill’s support and the selfless TDP volunteers, I would have had a far greater struggle in achieving my dreams. Through Mrs. Hill’s efforts, lives are changed every week in lessons, every summer at music camps, and every semester in colleges and conservatories around the country.

Last year, one-third of the principal positions in ASYO were held by TDP students, and the season before, two students were featured soloists with the youth orchestra. TDP graduates have attended every major conservatory and university in the country, including Curtis, Juilliard, Harvard and Yale universities. Over half a dozen students have been featured soloists with the Atlanta Symphony, and the first TDP graduate to attend a major conservatory recently was named a member of the Charlotte Symphony just two months after his graduation in 2007. That’s my brother Eric.

The TDP has helped change the face of American orchestras. Azira G. Hill hopes to reach more than 25 students each year, create a program to support TDP college graduates, and see orchestras around the country adapt this same approach to introducing classical music to the communities they serve. It is up to us to leave the program better than we found it. ■

*Stanford Thompson graduated from the Talent Development Program in 2005 and is currently a student at The Curtis Institute of Music, where he holds the William A. Loeb Fellowship. This is his first article for Encore Atlanta.*