

the arts



Bang the Drum Quickly

By Hope Reese
Photos by Chris Witzke

On a gray December afternoon, inside a building on the corner of Third and York streets in downtown Louisville, Diane Downs gazes over a sea of children waving mallets behind rows of drums and xylophones. “I’m gonna trust you to make it sound good,” the artistic director tells the band of seven- to 12-year-olds.

The group is the Louisville Leopard Percussionists. Originally named the Fabulous Leopard Percussionists (formed by Downs when she taught at King Elementary School, near Shawnee Park), the ensemble took flight in November 1993 when the second- and third-grade teacher discovered a stash of small Orff mallets in a school closet. *We can do something with these*, she thought. Currently in the middle of celebrating its 20th year, the group, now a registered community nonprofit, has performed at jazz festivals across the country, opened for My Morning Jacket and starred in a 2008 HBO documentary called *The Leopards Take Manhattan: The Little Band That Roared*. In March, the Leopards will hold their annual Big Gig at the Brown Theatre.

The Leopards aren’t your typical band. Many of them had not picked up an instrument before joining. And Downs? She’s not a percussionist, either. “We don’t take ‘talented kids,’” she says. “Those kids will find a place to play anywhere.” There are no auditions for the Leopards, and the kids don’t have to read music. What do they need? Heart. “A lot of times if you’re playing off sheet music, you sound like you’re playing off sheet music,” Downs says. “I want them to play from *inside*.” She stresses the meaning behind the music. When the Leopards learned “Bésame Mucho,” a classic Mexican ballad about love written by a young girl who had never been kissed, “We got in a circle, and I said, ‘Stop laughing!’ and we talked about what it might feel like to be in love,” Downs says. “They’re little kids, but they can do that. You just need to get their heads in the right spot.”

Running her hands through a wavy crop of mahogany hair, the 51-year-old, dressed in a green silky top, jeans and sneakers,

looks younger than her age. A few of the kids call “Miss Diane” funny, and a Leopard father, Stuart Ungar, reports that she’s been described as a “kid in a grown-up’s body.” Originally from Louisville, Downs started playing music in fourth grade but “wasn’t one of the good players.” She continued studying music at Morehead State University in eastern Kentucky before landing at King Elementary. For Downs, who now teaches arts and humanities at Norton Elementary in the East End, the Leopards are a second full-time job she can’t imagine living without. “I’ll be dead or in jail before I quit doing this,” she says. “I live alone with no children. Why else do you think I’m here?”

The band members meet twice a week

perform at the Big Gig, and Steel Leopards, sixth- to ninth-grade alums who don’t want to stop playing. Downs also runs a two-week summer camp so even more kids can participate. There were 77 kids at camp last year.

One Leopard alum has made it big: Hannah Ford, 23, who started playing in Downs’ third-grade class at King, is now the drummer for Prince. Ford moved to Chicago at age 12 and later enrolled in the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University, studying with Grammy Award-winner Paul Wertico. In August 2012, Prince, impressed by a video of her on YouTube, invited Ford to join his tour.

The Louisville Leopard Percussionists turn 20.

to practice jazz, blues and rock on a range of percussion instruments, including congas, timbales, drums, tambourines and xylophones. Instead of sticking to one instrument, they can learn as many as they want. It’s a collaborative process; once kids learn a part, they help a neighbor who hasn’t yet mastered it. “I don’t spotlight top kids,” Downs says. “The ones who can’t play as well but have their heart in it deserve just as many accolades as the super-talented kids.” In fact, when HBO first approached Downs about the documentary, she put up a bit of a protective fight. HBO wanted to focus on a single student as it had for the first two parts of its *Music in Me* series, but Downs refused. “I know you’re HBO, and you’re the big dogs and all,” she says she told them, “but if you focus on one kid, I’m not going to cooperate.” The HBO executives changed the show to feature the whole group.

Since 1993, the group has ballooned from 24 second- and third-graders to a performing ensemble of more than 56. In all, there are more than 370 Leopards. In 2009, to meet the growing demand, Leopards Lite was formed, with some 45 students from second to fifth grade who rehearse weekly and

Ford still has time for her Leopards. Last April, the group visited Vic’s Drum Shop in Chicago. Hiding in a drum case, Ford popped out to surprise the kids. “Once a Leopard, always a Leopard,” Ungar says. It’s a fiercely loyal group, with alumni frequently returning to visit or teach at summer camp. Three of Downs’ four assistant directors started as Leopards.

When Jim James of My Morning Jacket played with the Leopards at Waterfront Park in 2010, he was impressed by their performance and hard work. And he can’t help but wish the group had been around when he was a kid. “Music was my salvation, and I made great friends through it, but it can also be very isolating,” James messaged by email. “What is so important about the Leopards is, it develops community. It’s so important for kids to find themselves. To find something that makes sense and run with it.”

As several young Leopards set up instruments, coach friends and hop around behind xylophones on this cold December afternoon, two things are clear: They have found music, and they have found each other. □