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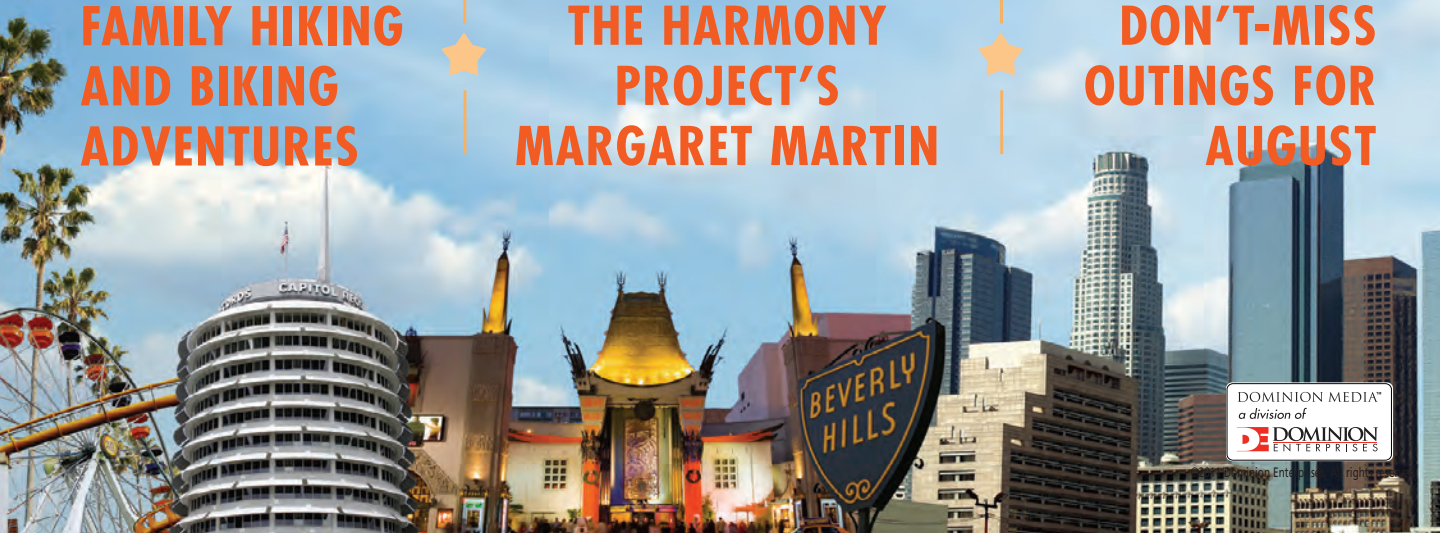
Best of
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LET'S GO:
FAMILY HIKING
AND BIKING
ADVENTURES

Q&A:
THE HARMONY
PROJECT'S
MARGARET MARTIN

CALENDAR:
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OUTINGS FOR
AUGUST



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ENTERPRISES

by Vivien Santana Hughes

Margaret Martin: Music Is Life

Margaret Martin's youngest son, a violin prodigy, decided he wanted his first paying gig – on the sidewalk at the Hollywood Farmer's Market. Martin obliged the 6-year-old, put the first dollar in his case and kept a respectful distance as 15 to 20 people gathered to hear the youngster play Brahms and Bach. Then, “A posse of L.A. gangbangers came into the market ... people were getting out of their way,” recounts Martin. She stiffened, ready to jump in, as they came right up to her son and stopped. And listened.

After about five minutes, the gang members silently put their own money in his case. “There was such respect in their attitude, that for me, it was like the heavens opened and God spoke and I knew that this had to be a big part of my public health work,” shares Martin who, at the time, was at UCLA earning her doctorate in public health. “Those gang members led me to research linking early sustained music education to improvements in math, language cognition, brain development and behavior – which is the basis for Harmony Project.”

Martin founded the nonprofit in 2001 with, she says, “36 kids and \$9,000 from the Hollywood Rotary Club.” Now Harmony Project serves 1,400 kids and operates 10 orchestras with two more slated for fall. But life wasn't always so harmonious for Martin when, as a young mother of two, she found herself homeless after leaving an abusive marriage. “If I was ever in a dark place, music was what I used [to feel better],” she says. A positive coping mechanism she has been sharing with L.A.'s at-risk youth for a decade.

What is the essence of Harmony Project?

We're about promoting the positive development of children through the study, practice and performance of music. We develop programs in the most economically disadvantaged neighborhoods in L.A., which happen also to be the high-crime gang zones. Essentially we're building youth gangs. But instead of crime or violence, the gangs we build are organized around harmony and community. Every kid that's practicing and learning to play is not getting into trouble. We require our students



Harmony Project founder Margaret Martin, with student Andres Sanchez, says, “Our students have to practice almost every day or it makes their [orchestra] section sound bad. Here, peer pressure can come to play in a very positive way!”

to remain in school – and they do. We operate in neighborhoods where the drop-out rate exceeds 70%, but 100% of our students remain enrolled in school. And, in the last two years, 100% of our high school graduates went on to college or trade school. Two are on full-ride scholarships at USC and Dartmouth!

What ages do you target?

We start our kids as early as we can get them – 6 or 7 years of age and we stick with them. That's the unique thing about Harmony Project: tuition-free, year-round, for their entire childhood. We connect our students with professional musician mentors for five or more hours per week. The orchestras have many flavors: we've got large classical ensembles, a hip-hop orchestra, a jazz band. And

during and after college many of our students continue with the program and mentor younger kids.

Share a favorite success story.

One student wrote to us that he was in English as a Second Language classes in the first half of sixth grade. Soon he got into regular English classes. By seventh grade, he was in honors classes. He did it by using the same routine he was using to study violin. He was practicing a lot, so he was being moved up into increasingly advanced violin classes. He did the same thing with his schoolwork and look what happened!

How can L.A. Parents get involved?

They can hold house parties to introduce Harmony Project to their friends and we will send our clarinet quintet to perform! They can donate online or help us expand our foundation of sponsors. We need volunteers in many areas – musicians to mentor, general office assistance and, this fall, film and video production. Visit www.harmony-project.org

Chat Room columnist Vivien Santana Hughes is a former L.A. Parent editor and the mother of three – two sons in college and (surprise!) a 6-year-old daughter. She lives with her family in La Cañada-Flintridge.