

THE BALTIMORE SUN



A leap into creativity



BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO

Jazz guitarist Rob Levit shared his love of the arts by creating a summer program that immerses at-risk children from the Annapolis area in music, theater and art.

Program gives kids a chance to let their artistic side come out to play

By Jonathan Pitts
THE BALTIMORE SUN

While growing up in a well-to-do Richmond, Va., family, Rob Levit never knew quite what to do with the surge of energy he often felt racing through him like a current.

He hadn't mastered an instrument or learned to paint. He had no hankering to write. So he did the only thing he could think of. He became the class clown.

"I was always getting in trouble," says Levit, 44, an improvisational jazz guitar-

ist with 15 music CDs and an international performing career to his credit. "I was channeling that excess energy into cracking people up, not art."

Levit says it took him a while to "find [his] voice" because he never encountered a mentor who helped him explore what he did well.

He'll spend this week helping others avoid that fate. The Eastport resident will direct a group of area arts teachers in the third annual Creating Communities Arts Mentorship Academy, a youth camp he says is so intensive that the attendees — at-risk children from greater Annapolis — will have no choice but to express them-

selves.

"It's a total arts-immersion experience," Levit says. "We're going to overwhelm them. They won't have time to be intimidated by the usual insecurities."

The 54 students, all on full scholarship, will rotate through five arts classes a day: African drumming, drama, jazz dance, poetry and mural-making. On Friday, they'll share the results at an afternoon performance.

The camp is as much an expression of the energetic Levit as the guitar solos you can hear him play at 49 West, the Annapolis coffeehouse where he and his band have performed every Thursday night for

the past 13 years.

"His passion is just so palpable, and you can see the kids responding to that," says Bess Langbein, director of the Community Foundation of Anne Arundel County, an organization that supports philanthropic projects. "He makes it contagious."

You'd never guess it to hear him play, but Levit didn't pick up a guitar until he was 18 — late for anyone who aspires to a career in the field. But when he did, he could feel his life change.

He had tried the violin, piano and other instruments without much success. No See **ARTS**, page 5

Giving kids chance to find inner artist

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teacher ever encouraged him in the arts or suggested he had talent.

Something about the guitar, though, let him speak.

"In traditional music education, there's an overwhelming stress on fundamentals," he says. "They're crucial, but self-expression is just as important. Feeling that connection gives you motivation to keep learning."

For Levit, a view of life came into being. Playing alone or in a group, he says, forced him not just to find an outlet for his emotions, but also to make decisions and see what direction they took, hear others' points of view and to be a leader when necessary.

"Creativity isn't just about mastering a particular art form," he says. "It's a way of finding out who you are and where you want to go."

Levit and his wife, Elaine, an Anne Arundel native, moved from New York to Annapolis in 1996. At first, the place struck him as awfully quiet. "Where's the action?" he remembers thinking. Then he discovered a thriving music community that offered plenty of local gigs, not to mention access to

"You wouldn't think they could pull this all off in just a week, but it happens."

Rhonda Ulmer, parent

Washington and Baltimore. His touring schedule never slowed down much — he still flies to Los Angeles and Europe regularly — but the slower pace of life allowed him to look around. What Levit saw were kids, many from low-income areas, who had many of the same needs he'd had while growing up. "A lot of young people, for socioeconomic or other reasons, don't have much of an opportunity to explore creative options," he says, "let alone mentors who support them unconditionally." He decided to offer creativity as an agent of change.

Levit, who also paints and writes poetry, started offering workshops and courses on artistic inspiration, the creative process, even entrepreneurship at public schools and corporate retreats, at hospices and in rehab centers, in every case designing a program unique to his clientele. He earned a reputation as a positive force, winning honors from entities as diverse as Daimler-Chrysler, the Maryland Artist Teacher Institute and Leadership Anne Arundel.

"Whenever there's a program or a project discussed that touches on creativity or the arts, the first person everybody thinks about is Rob," says Langbein. "He has already done so much, and people realize he delivers."

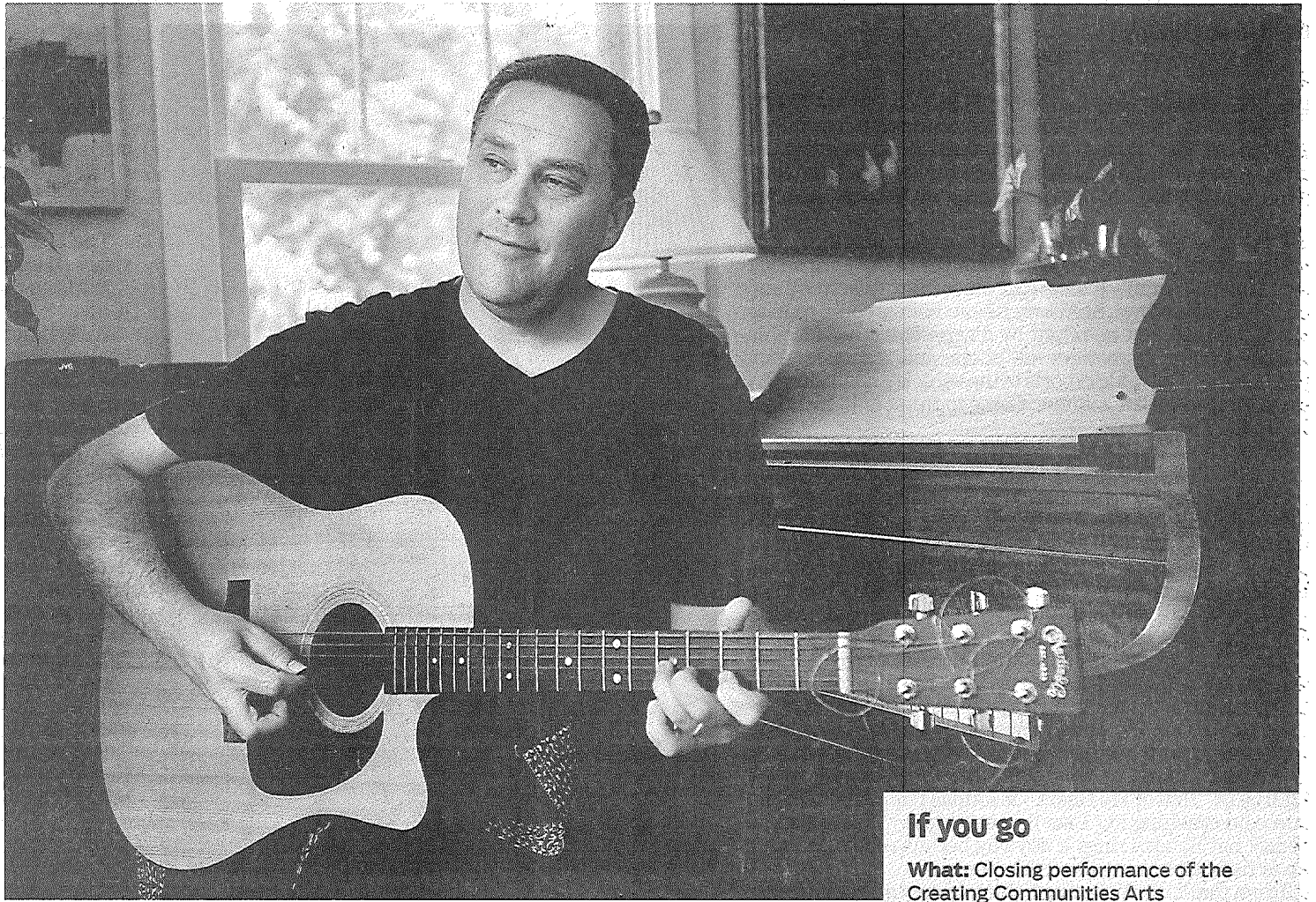
'I did that'

In person, Levit speaks with a convivial ease that seems almost out of keeping with the dead seriousness of his aims.

Referring once in a while to a meticulously kept notebook, he extols the "life-changing power" of the arts as easily as some might discuss the weather.

"I do believe in a holistic approach to educating, in dealing with the whole child," he says. "That sounds a little cliched, I guess, but the trick is making it a reality, and I think we do that."

Three years ago, he created a nonprofit to that end, Creating Communities, an organization he hoped would "harness the power of the arts to build life skills and self-esteem and foster connections across cultures." Its first showcase was the arts academy, the first incarnation of which accepted 27 students between the ages of 7 and 17 and recommended by the school system, a shelter or a social service agency as a person with



BARBARA HADDOCK TAYLOR/BALTIMORE SUN PHOTO

Rob Levit's program is "a total arts-immersion experience," he says, where the 54 students will learn African drumming, drama, jazz dance, poetry and mural-making.

interest or promise in the arts.

A raft of donors, including the county government, several nonprofits and a handful of corporations, provided each student with a full scholarship. Organizers say that without aid, the camp would cost every attendee about \$600.

Levit hit the ground running. He hired five mentors, including Raven Bishop, an Anne Arundel art teacher, for jazz dance and area musician Elizabeth Melvin for African drumming, as well as a group of volunteers.

Every morning, Levit met each child personally at the site, the Maryland Hall for the Creative Arts in Annapolis, and rallied them with a speech. The volunteers served them breakfast. The teaching team divided the children into groups, plunged them into creative projects and told them they would put on an original play, a dance recital and a group drumming session as well as exhibit a full-fledged mural by the end of the week.

In groups that blended the younger students with the older ones, they plotted strategy, practiced skills and got encouragement from mentors. Students worked up their own choreography and practiced daily, came up with mural ideas and got to work, and submerged themselves in ensemble drumming.

On the final day, every child took part in an extended percussion jam. "You can't do that without coming to grips with working as a team," Levit says.

Rhonda Ulmer, an Odenton resident and mother of two children who attended a previous camp, says the immersion approach works like a charm. Her son Jordan, 9, a shy fellow who has a form of epilepsy that can cause stuttering, never guessed he'd have the nerve to get up on a stage and speak in front of an audience.

That Friday he did, telling parents and other community members, in flawless English, what the camp had meant to him. Since then, she hasn't been able to keep Jordan out of volunteer activities at his own school, Seven Oaks Elementary.

"I attribute that change to Mr. Rob and the academy," says Ulmer, who first encoun-

tered Levit in a leadership workshop. "They're so attentive and loving. They make the children feel they can accomplish whatever they want. And they do."

Both Jordan and Ta'Nia, 7, an artist who loves drawing in colored pencil, took part in creating a mural of Anne Arundel County scenes that now adorns the wall of an Annapolis Whole Foods.

"Every time we go there, they point out one more area of the mural they designed or drew," says Ulmer, who will bring the pair to camp again this year. "They say, 'I did that.' They're really excited to feel they're part of the community."

In the limelight

In jazz, the most stimulating jams can unfold from the simplest chord patterns.

Levit's whole approach is like that. "I see [the arts academy] as one more medium in which to express myself," says Levit, who now calls arts outreach 50 percent of his creative career.

The founding director keeps improvising. Levit meets with the mentors every spring, lays out a few goals, and leads a brainstorming session in which they conjure new ideas to build on the old — one reason the academy has grown each year, from 27 students to 42 to this year's 54.

For this summer, he has established a relationship with Happy Home, an orphanage in Gaborone, Botswana, and will ask students to incorporate the African nation, as well as the home and its children, in the murals they'll make.

With the help of Creative Conversations, another area nonprofit, he's bringing in Kurtis Lamkin, a widely known South Carolina poet, to hold workshops on the oral and musical traditions of African-American poetry. Teachers will be sharing new arts-related terminology, including basics like "rhythm" and "tempo" in music, and test students on the words at week's end.

Levit will bring his band in to jam, asking kids to sing scat. He'll show them inspirational signs ("You Are Creative") each morning. And in drama and storytelling, a new class, students will get up in front of

If you go

What: Closing performance of the Creating Communities Arts Mentorship Academy

Where: Maryland Hall for the Creative Arts, 801 Chase St., Annapolis

When: 12:15 p.m. Friday, July 2

Admission: Free and open to the public

Information: creatingcommunities.net

others and try proven techniques — body language, projection, facial expressions — to "tell their own story."

Most of that work will be incorporated in the closing performance Friday, an occasion for parents, sponsors and the general public.

Those who have seen it say it is not to be missed.

"It's amazing to watch these kids, many of whom start out very shy, get up on stage and show what they can do," says Langbein, adding that some glance toward Levit as they're speaking or performing. "It's hard to watch without getting tears in your eyes."

"You wouldn't think they could pull this all off in just a week, but it happens," says Rhonda Ulmer, whose children begged her to get them out of a second week of YMCA camp so they could attend Levit's camp again.

Levit says it's hard to quantify a student's progress, but it can still be hard to miss.

Take the first year. On the very first day, every camp counselor's nightmare happened when Levit realized, on taking attendance, that one of his campers — a painfully withdrawn 12-year-old girl — was missing.

After a half-hour search, he found her hiding in a restroom. "She was terrified [about trying] all this stuff," he says.

By Friday, the girl was part of a dance troupe that performed onstage. She did so well she was voted most improved artist, winning a scholarship to a class at Maryland Hall.

Levit, no longer anybody's clown, offers an earnest smile.

"Will she be a professional dancer? Who knows?" he says. "I do know she felt a part of something."

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