

# Chicago Tribune

DAILY  
Southtown

## Guest column: Strings program may bring sense of ‘belonging’ to Southland College Prep, District 162 schools

By CARL COGAR

DAILY SOUTHTOWN | DEC 31, 2021 AT 7:00 AM



My aunt played violin at the same elementary school I would eventually attend on Chicago’s West Side. While I was too young to see her play as a grade school student, the notion set my imagination ablaze.

Several years later when I arrived at the same school, the performing arts wing was a storage room. Sometime in the latter 1960s and into the 1970s, fine arts and performing arts programs in schools with children of color grew scarce and, ultimately, nonexistent in the teetering Chicago Public School system. The remaining pockets of opportunities were south at Chicago Vocational High School and Dunbar Vocational High School,

*Carl Cogar (Southland College Prep)*

places too far to travel safely. My dream of playing music was replaced briefly with reality. A young guy my size should be playing football to get to college, they said. While the undertaking matched my size and skill set, I had another kind of playing in mind, a horn. Troubled during my first two years of high school, I transferred to Collins High School after directly experiencing racism at Von Steuben Metropolitan Science Center. Having been born to teen high school dropouts and entrenched in a welfare system that advocated for the single parent environment

(that continues to this day), school was often the only time and place I could regularly get breakfast and hot lunch.

---

My attendance was hardly perfect, but I needed to eat. Athletically I excelled, but it was all pick up ball on the playground. There were no organized Little League teams. I played grade school basketball, but didn't stay with it because the school was located in a rival gang area, which meant after-school practices proved perilous outside the safe travel times.

My sophomore year I found band, putting many of my troubles behind. Something in that band room clicked for me. Maybe it was the energy of Jimmy Tillman or the students' interactions with one another. I don't know. I found the pursuit of a college scholarship through my tuba more advantageous than continuing football. My heart was in the band.

Mostly, I came to realize that being in the band room provided a real feeling of belonging. My priorities at school shifted from two meals a day to having a place I felt welcomed, safe and part of. This became a place where I didn't dwell on the negative life of growing up on the West Side of Chicago.

Two recent events in my adult life have helped me revisit that "welcome" feeling, further affirming my role as a music teacher: "I belong" to a bigger vision.

Miguel Cardona, the secretary of education, sworn in March 2, 2021, delivered music for all our ears:

*"Music is a way for students to find themselves and learn critical thinking skills. Often, the systems we have set up are geared toward some academic areas more than others. Sometimes music and the arts are not looked at as part of the primary experience that students should have — it is thought of as an ancillary experience. But music and the arts are a very big part of the education experience for me. In fact, music probably does more to develop critical thinking skills and analytical thinking and improvisation than many of the other topics we spend time on in school. For me it's an integral part and one of the best ways we can nurture the natural talent that students have, which might have not been exposed or realized yet."*

The second event is marked by the sudden arrival of Apollo's Fire: the Cleveland Baroque Orchestra to Southland College Prep Charter High School and Matteson Elementary District 162. Their message goes beyond words with action.

---

Apollo's Fire conductor and creative director Jeannette Sorrell and executive director Howard Bender arrived in Richton Park one morning last August after a full night of performing with their Baroque orchestra at Ravinia Festival in Highland Park. Invited by our CEO of Southland College Prep, Blondean Y. Davis, Apollo's Fire adopted us.

On Oct. 26, our student musicians performed side by side with Apollo's Fire to celebrate the launch of a strings program at District 162. Sorrell's dream of bringing Baroque music to African American students was being realized.

Apollo's Fire's Windy City Series continued to enthusiastic audiences the next night in Lincoln Park at DePaul University and in Evanston at the Music Institute of Chicago. Some of the more ardent patrons traveled to Chicago from Milwaukee and even St. Louis to hear the concerts.

A new strings program began in earnest Nov. 8, one that flows from our primary grades up through the 12th grade, following traditions previously established in band and choir, speech, dance, drama, sculpting, painting, digital arts, orchestra and broadcast production, all providing a sense of "belonging" to the future.

We at Southland College Prep Charter High School who were in the audience for the performances of Vivaldi's Four Seasons imagine someday seeing our own students on stage, much the way I imagined performing where my aunt first played.

*Carl Cogar, Ed.D., is fine arts director for Southland College Prep Charter High School and Matteson Elementary District 162.*