

# Keeping the Beat

*IC students share love of music at juvenile detention center*

By Carolyn Cutrone

Baruch Whitehead places his fingers on the keys of the piano pushed up against the white-cement wall and plays a chord. The 18-year-old boy sitting next to him peers down at the pattern of black and white keys and memorizes where he should place his fingers. He matches his up and repeats the chord. As the notes fill the air, his milky brown eyes slip shut. He's gone for a moment, falling into the sound.

"I get lost in the music all the time, honestly. You'll know if I'm getting lost in the music, I won't even answer you. That's when I start dougging inside."

Before arriving, Baruch zips through sharply curved roads and endless fields of farmland in his white van filled with musicians. He drives the group quickly through the cold Ithaca air for the twenty-five minute drive, all the while chatting with them about the day's events. Every so often he erupts in a fit of booming laughter. But he's serious too, especially when it comes to discussing the goal for the day—teaching their selected song in a way that promotes quick success.

Turning to Tito Reyes next to him, he begins to tap his leg slowly, right hand on his thigh, left on the steering wheel. Pat, pat pat. "Yeah we'll do that beat," he says. His body moves as he feels the lyrics to "Let it Be," the selected song for the day. Tito nods his head in an upward scoop, replicating the metronome on Baruch's leg.

Two girls sit in the back of the van. Michelle Breitenbach is dressed head to toe in slacks and a blouse. Her bangs brush over her forehead and her smile gleams out ever so often when music re-enters the conversation. Lauren Smith's long brown hair sits sideways on her shoulder, clasped in a ponytail. She taps Aidan Boardman in front of her, and shows him the sheet of music she'll be using. "I'm going to use this, I think this format is a little clearer than the one we used last week." He nods his head taking a close look at the letters spaced out on the white page representing notes: G D D C.

The conversation evaporates slowly as the vehicle comes to a stop. Hands grab for folders and instruments, but leave all phones and jackets behind. One by one they hop out of the van to be greeted by a towering layer of barbed wire.

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Every Thursday afternoon this group of musicians from Ithaca College visits young men at the MacCormick Secure Center, a youth detention facility in Brooktondale, New York. They bring with them a different song each week, along with their guitars, keyboards, drum sets and an intense passion for their craft. The boys in the MacCormick Center range from the ages of 14-20 and have been convicted of felonies.

The program traces its roots back to Patricia Spencer's Grant Writing class at Ithaca College. Last year, Spencer's class wrote a proposal for a Creative Arts Outreach program to visit the MacCormick Center through an already established program called HEARD. Once the proposal gained support and funding from Ithaca College, the writing students teamed up with a few music majors and worked to make their idea a reality. Amelia Moore, a music performance and music education alumna, was a key member of this initial group. She has a strong connection to youth outreach because she volunteered for two years in an all-girls secured facility in Lansing.

After seeing the Creative Arts Outreach program through its preliminary stages last May, she decided she had to stay in Ithaca after graduation to make sure the program's initial year went smoothly. Because of students like her, who transformed the program from an idea to a functional class, it has made strides since last year. But more than Amelia's drive, her pure compassion for people on an individual level defines her ability to connect with the boys.

"If you don't know where they come from, their ethnicity, their educational background, about their families, you really can't begin to be compassionate toward [the program]," she said. "A lot of people can look at them as felons or what they did wrong but if we were all judged by what we've done wrong and our shortcomings of whatever expectations, the world would be a lot different," Amelia said.

When the boys arrive for their 45 minutes of music, a sea of red and khaki fills

the room. The Delta unit passes through the doorways, each boy dressed in a red collared shirt tucked neatly into their pants. Lauren waits by her keyboard and offers her hand to each boy passing by. A tall, thin boy holds out his hand to Lauren. "Manuel," he says as he grasps and releases her palm. Lauren's eyebrows shoot up and a smile sweeps across her freckled cheeks. Once each boy introduces himself, he chooses an instrument and begins to learn his part. Before a few moments pass, notes clash through the air. The vibration of strumming strings, tapping triangles, pressing keys, and pounding drums bounces from wall to wall.

Baruch surveys the room in a calm and collected state. His round cheeks rise into a smile often, but when he's ready to teach, his muscles tighten and his eyes focus. There's no messing around with his music. As he makes his way past the line of strumming guitars, he spots Manuel sitting slouched over on the rugged red couch tucked behind the door. "What's your name, son?" He asks. "Manuel," the boy replies. Baruch doesn't hear him though. His voice is too low and the swarming notes of music are too loud. "Manuel," he repeats as he squints his eyes up at Baruch's tall sturdy frame. "Manuel, nice to meet you. Why don't you come over here? I'm gonna teach you some chords."

"When I first got here, I didn't want to [play music.] But the things [Dr. Whitehead] was doing convinced me to want to do it," Manuel said. "He was telling me it's easy, and this is what I could have been doing besides being out [on the streets] He's just telling me better solutions of how to do my time well, besides trying to get in trouble all the time."

Manuel presses his long skinny fingers down on the white and black notes of the keyboard. Although he enjoys learning the piano, his true passion is dancing. He used to break dance and partake in talent shows in elementary school. Since the piano is a new form of expression for him, he appreciates the patience Baruch has when they sit down together, fingers moving in synchronicity.

"He actually takes his time with a person," said Manuel. "He doesn't rush through. He makes sure you know how

to play it and he makes sure that you're getting what he's saying besides trying to hurry up and do something and then move onto the next thing without you knowing that one part."

Baruch's experience as a professor at Ithaca College translates to his teaching at the MacCormick Center. But perhaps the fact that he had two brothers who were in prison gives him a deeper understanding of the personal battles the boys he works with deal with day in and day out. He feels the program is a good fit for him.

"It's very interesting to me that all of the residents there are men of color and being a person of color myself, I think it was just a natural outgrowing for me in terms of wanting to go ahead and help and perhaps make a difference in the eyes of those young men that made some mistakes," Baruch said. "If they can see me as a positive role model, being a college professor, than maybe it would help them make some better choices or say, 'here's a man of color that's doing okay, perhaps I can do better in life, too.'"

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The tall metal lights that mark the border of the prison are as tall as the surrounding trees. The pointed edges form circular loops until they meet halfway at the entrance in the fence. The musicians from Ithaca College call this "the cage." After they are buzzed in, the metal door slams behind them. Momentarily locked in the "cage," they wait for the next door to be unlocked.

"We're gonna do some recording today. I need you guys to be on task. I need you to work," Baruch announces as he strolls around the room and darts his eyes briefly at each musician working on their piece.

"Bum, bum...bum bum." Baruch sings the beat of the bass guitar setting the rhythm before the rest of the instruments enter into the melody.

"Teach me how to play it and I'll play it," a boy says, sitting with his back up against the wall, guitar in lap.

Aidan walks over to the boy and

bends down in order to be the same height as the boy sitting in the chair. He places the eager student's fingers on the taught strings of the guitar. The boy looks down, eyebrows scrunching tightly. With one clean stroke he brushes the guitar. Aidan nods his head vigorously as his face illuminates with excitement. "Yeah, you got it!" He slides to his right to show the next guitar player their chord.

In the center of the room, Lewis, the oldest resident of his unit, sits in front of the recording equipment. He is controlling the recording session, listening to each part separately in the computer as they stream electronically through the equipment. He is the leader of the unit. Mature, calm and focused, he works side by side with Baruch.

Baruch continues to survey the room, making sure each section of instruments is on track—they have limited time. Behind him, one of the guitarists starts laughing loudly with the boy next to him. Baruch turns around quickly to address their momentary lack of focus. "Guys, guys, we came to work, not to fool around. You feelin' me?"

The boy looks up, his face serious. "I feel you."

"If you need to laugh, keep it in your big toe." Baruch suggests. A few chuckles pass through the room and trickle out. Silence fills the air again.

The piano comes in and Baruch looks straight at Manuel. He nods his head, feeling the music hit the perfect beat and move through the air, and then glances back to Lewis.

"Alright Lewis, you got the notes?"

Peering up from the equipment, his eyes large through the magnification of his silver glasses, Lewis nods

and presses record.

"Alright here we go, see you at the end," Baruch declares.

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Finally inside the building, each student takes a turn passing through the grey archway that is the metal detector. A loud beep sounds as Lauren passes through. A staff counselor holds a wand up to her body brushing up and down her legs and across her arms. "Lift your feet up," she says. Lauren lifts each foot up in the air and a loud beep erupts from the wand. Her heel set off the noise. After each student has been inspected, they pick up their instruments and make their way through the last hallway to meet the boys. The counselor unlocks the door as her large metal key chain clangs loudly against the steal door.

To Manuel, the simple fact that the students and professors from Ithaca College show up every week is enough for him. Growing up, Manuel never had the luxury of living in a stable household. His mother was addicted to drugs and his father struggled with the law, eventually landing himself in prison. When he was still in elementary school, Manuel decided to move to his grandparent's house around the block. He felt his parents' home offered him nothing valuable.

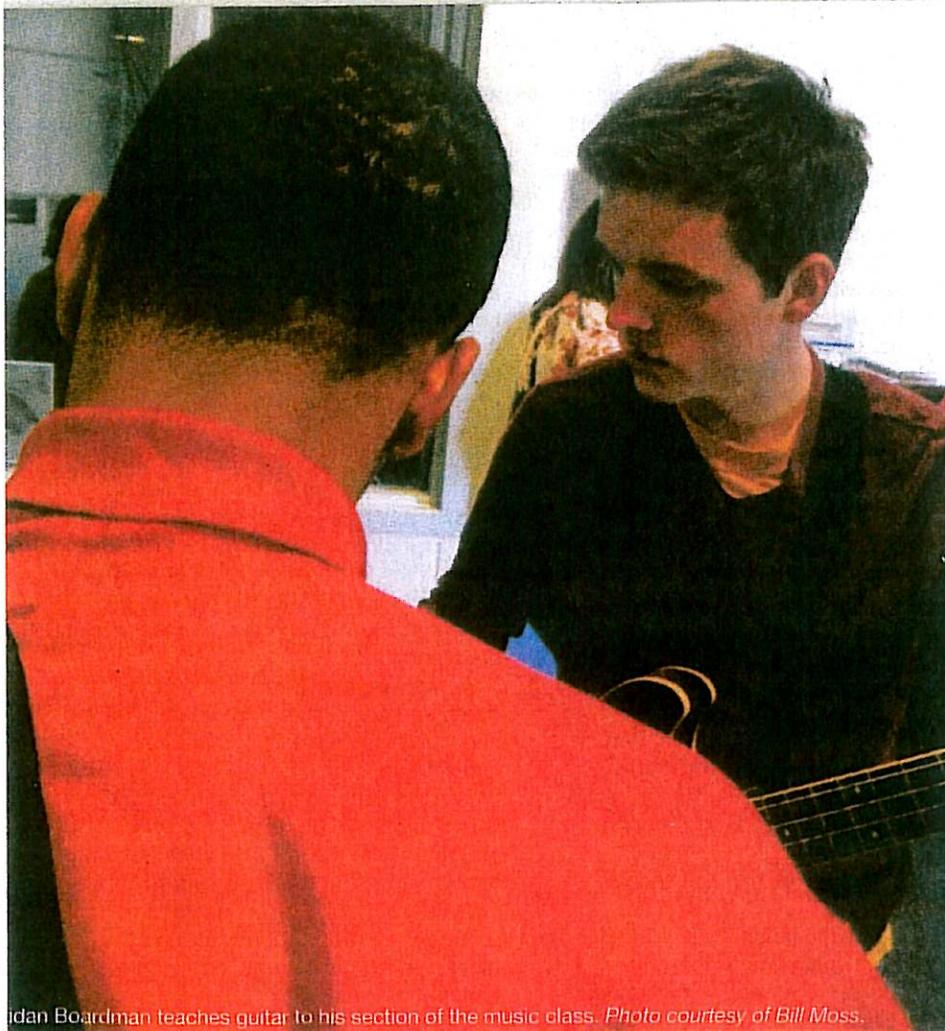
"My grandmother gave

me a curfew. She didn't want me doing nothing [bad] but then she died. And after, that's when I started to do actual things." He found himself in trouble.

Once Manuel's grandmother passed away, he had to return to his parent's house. It wasn't long until he was arrested and eventually brought to the MacCormick Center to serve time. With



Photos by Bill Moss



Aidan Boardman teaches guitar to his section of the music class. Photo courtesy of Bill Moss.

a jagged history of instability and a lack of guidance, Manuel isn't quick to trust strangers. But he says he tries to give everyone a chance.

"I'm not gonna lie, I was thinking, 'this is some temporary thing and these people don't even care about the people that are in here.' And then they kept coming. And once they keep coming, it shows me that they look at [us] and they want to help."

And the program will continue. Pat Spencer's Grant Writing class is currently working on a proposal to continue the program next year and expand it to other creative outlets such as writing. Unfortunately for one boy, he won't be able to continue music, at least in the near future. Lewis moved on from MacCormick in early April and was transferred to an adult correctional facility when he turned 21. On the last day with the program, Lewis sat in control of the recording equipment so he could have a CD of the music he and his unit created together.

Sam Underwood, an Ithaca College music student who has been working with the program all year, has been deeply moved by Lewis's character. She said, compared to the other boys, although all respectful, his demeanor was different because he was always interested and naturally

wanted to learn more. As the year went by, Sam spent not just one semester, but two, watching Lewis grow musically and physically. Unfortunately, the latter made her realize his time was almost up.

"Reading about [adult] prisons, I know that the small guys get beat up and the last few months he was trying to fill out muscles just to protect himself and that just made it so real. I can assume that's why and I really started to notice that," she said sadly.

When the recording was finished and all the instruments were locked in their cases, Lewis remained behind his desk of electronics surrounded by a few students and Baruch. Their chairs in a circle around his muscular body, they leaned closer and spoke their goodbyes.

"Looking at him, at most of the kids, but especially Lewis, it's like 'how did you end up here? And you have more time to do?' It seems like, 'what could you have done because you're just this kind, gentle spirit.'" Lauren said.

They touched his hand one last time and he smiled before saying, "It's been a pleasure."

Peering down, the students and Baruch headed for the door. Sam shook her head as a hint of water welled in the corner

of her eye. "That was tough. That was Lewis's last day." Lauren nodded and shook her head towards the ground in solemn agreement.

Leaving the metal "cage" locked behind them, the students and Baruch make their way out of MacCormick and to their white van. The tinted black window of the vehicle reflects the image of the harsh silver coiled fences for a moment just before they drive away.

Remembering his first day at MacCormick, Aidan remembers one guitar player who felt the music transcend through their physical location and constraints. Aidan taught him three chord progression, one found in most popular music. Aidan's fingers, indented from strumming each note precisely, finally stopped playing. He stood back for a minute and watched the boy try on his own.

"Suddenly he just started jamming to all three and he just said, 'I can hear it, I can hear how it's all fitting in together.' And then we played through a whole song and by the end he said 'man this all went away for a second.'"

The physical walls remind them often enough of where they are. But if music may hold the ability to vaporize their presence momentarily, that half-hour visit is worth it.

Baruch stops the car one last time before pulling left out of the parking lot. Foot pushing down the pedal, the van glides through the long winding roads, now darker than when they arrived.

"You have to have spirit, that want to be a mentor...to see it as we are here for you and you are here for us," Baruch said.

It's a two way street for the Ithaca College students and the boys at MacCormick. Amelia Moore stayed in Ithaca because she was pulled into their world. She doesn't look at the boys for a second as in a different place than her— in a literal sense yes—but looking past a one-dimensional perspective she sees it as all the same.

"They still have goals and life in them even within those walls. If we think about it, we're all enslaved, incarcerated to some kind of system, whether it be academia while we're here or our economic system. Theirs are obviously much tighter walls but being able to see that they can set goals for themselves even if it's to educate themselves or reach out to somebody beyond those worlds, I think that through the projects through the arts, they can make that tangible," she said.