

Core Values: The Chamber Musician as Community Activist

by Heidi Waleson



The Providence String Quartet includes, from left, Sebastian Ruth, Jessie Montgomery, Sara Stalnaker '98, and Jesse Holstein '96. (photo by John Foraste)

Cellist **Sara Stalnaker '98** expected that she would make a living as an orchestral musician. And although she plays in the Rhode Island Philharmonic at night, something else forms the core of her musical life.

Stalnaker is a member of the Providence String Quartet (PSQ), in which being a musician is inextricably bound up with a social mission. The quartet is the resident ensemble and centerpiece of Community MusicWorks in Providence, Rhode Island, a neighborhood-based organization that gives music and musicians a vital role in transforming urban communities.

Founded in 1997 by violinist Sebastian Ruth, Community MusicWorks provides weekly violin, viola, and cello lessons to 65 children in a low-income Providence community. The program also includes regular workshops, performances, concert trips, and a discussion group for older students—all free of charge.

Stalnaker's ensemble mates include Jesse Holstein '96, who trades violin and viola responsibilities with Ruth, and violinist Jessie Montgomery, who joined the PSQ last year. For these individuals, teaching and playing are two sides of the same coin.

"We look at it as a quartet residency that is entrenched in a neighborhood," says Stalnaker. "The core is the quartet and the relationship we have with one another. We take the inspiration that the quartet brings to our lives, and give it to the families, building relationships out in the neighborhood. For me, the kids and the quartet are really equal. I have a lot of four-year-old relationships with kids and families, and that takes up a huge space in my life.

"It took a while to accept that it was really happening, that I have a job that expresses all parts of my self—love of kids, a desire to improve the world, love of chamber music."

Stalnaker has 19 students. "The kids can pick up cellos, read music, and like it. We don't necessarily turn the kids into conservatory students. We teach them what it is to have discipline and a large group of caring adults around them. In the teen group, they are interested in issues like how to change their community."

There is no question that, for Stalnaker, who studied with Professor of Cello Peter Rejto, her Oberlin experience informed her perception of herself as a musician as much as it informed her view of the world. She chose Oberlin because it felt "like a place where I could make my own way. There weren't boxes to be fit into. I could become who I needed to become."

The quartet rehearses in Community MusicWorks' storefront office, which is open to anyone who cares to walk in and which serves as a model and inspiration. The teenage students are now starting to play together and form their own ensembles.

The PSQ does plenty of performing in Providence and has taken on other dates in New England as well. Stalnaker has no regrets about not having a conventional touring career. "I would miss the kids too much. Continuity with them is at the heart of the program, and with lessons, performance parties, concert trips, and teen groups, I see them several times a week. If we're gone—even for our one-week, paid practice retreat, which is lovely—I feel I've missed something."