



Ian Wingfield

Vanessa Aragon sits in front of the worn brown spinet piano adorned with sheet music and wooden frames filled with pictures of her family.

"Which book should I play?" she asks her mother, Ernestina. "How about Mozart? That's my favorite."

Then the 15-year-old opens her practice book and begins to play.

Such a scene would have been impossible for Vanessa three years ago — her family couldn't afford a piano or lessons. Her father, a welder, and her mother, a teacher's assistant at Herrera Elementary School in Phoenix, were working around the clock just to provide for their five children.

Vanessa's life changed when a choir instructor at her school saw her watching his hands as he played the piano and gave her an application to the Christmas House Foundation. The Christmas House provides inner-city children in Phoenix with free music instruction from dedicated professional music educators.

Rosebell Schurz, who founded the house, grew up in Munich, where she led a cultured life filled with music, until World War II took it all away. After meeting Mother Teresa 10 years ago, Schurz was inspired to buy the dilapidated home off Van Buren Street to shelter the elderly. When funds began to fall short in 1995, she re-opened her doors to give underprivileged children a chance in music.

The city of Phoenix awarded her a \$50,000 block grant to begin the 120-student project. "We have children who almost have no home to go to — not all of them, but some have very difficult situations," Schurz says. "They come here and get attention and recognition."

Music director Judy Conrad says, "This gives them a chance at a different life. They are learning self-discipline, which is crucial, and they are also learning goal setting. If they practice 15 to 20 minutes a day, they get somewhere. If you want

something bad enough and you put aside time for it every day you can accomplish it. A lot of kids have never thought that way."

Although the Christmas House is in a high-crime area and is surrounded by homes vandalized with graffiti, it is a safe haven for the children. "It's not a glamorous organization," Schurz says. "When I first walked in these doors 10 years ago, even then it was almost destroyed. But I saw something very beautiful and healing."

When they arrive at Christmas House, students sign a contract agreeing to practice at least 20 minutes a day, keep their grades up and participate in community outreach projects. The lessons, tutoring and instruments are all free.

To pay the bills, the Christmas House has to raise money, surviving primarily on grants. "I've stayed up thousands of nights worrying what tomorrow will bring," Schurz says.

To help raise funds, students often play concerts, performing at nursing homes, at Desert Botanical Garden and at local churches.

Last year, Vanessa and two other students were picked to travel to Austria to help celebrate Mozart's birthday. She says she couldn't help feeling jittery during the show.

"I was kinda nervous," she says. "I was like, 'Oh my goodness, there are all these musicians who have been playing for 30 years and here's me. They're gonna say I don't belong up here.' But I just got up there and I was like, 'OK, calm down, don't think about the people,' and I did it."

Schurz was awestruck. "When it was over my heart sank for a minute," she says. "This was the biggest joy." And Vanessa? She hopes to continue with music in college and perform around the world.

— Dan Marek

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Toni Press-Coffman is about as off-off-Broadway as a playwright can be. But the Tucson writer's work has garnered attention at some of theater's most prestigious showcases, heralding the potential breakthrough of an Arizona talent.

Most recently, Press-Coffman's play *Touch*, which won ASU's biannual Arizona Playwright's contest in 1998, was tapped for a full production by the Actors Theatre of Louisville, Kentucky — which, in its 20-year history, introduced John Pielmeier's *Agnes of God* and Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, among others, to mass audiences.

After *Touch's* run ends this month, Press-Coffman heads off to Edinburgh, Scotland, for the famed Fringe Festival, where her play about Richard III, *Two Days of Grace at Middleham*, will be performed.

All 20 of Press-Coffman's plays have been realized in one form or another. Her success belies the notion that a playwright has to move into a lower-Manhattan railroad flat, subsist off of mac-and-cheese and schmooze producer types until she gets noticed.

On the other hand, it's not as if Press-Coffman, who is 50, is an overnight success.

She's been writing plays all of her adult life and still makes most of her living as a freelance grant writer.

Later this year, she'll spend almost four months in Indianapolis, where an NEA grant has her writing and working with a local theater — called, interestingly enough, the Phoenix.

It's enough to make an Arizona playwright homesick. Which means she has no intention of loading her cumulative successes into a moving van and heading east to New York.

—Melissa Morrison