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Music To Mend the Spirit

At the city's only music-therapy Program aimed at foster children, therapists have long helped rescue troubled lives. But can they survive a new round of funding cuts?

By **Chuin-Wei Yap**
 STAFF WRITER

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Someone was shot again last month on Troutman Street, off Wyckoff Avenue in Bushwick, two blocks from where Mayra Sierra lives. Here, not far from where Brooklyn melts into Queens, boarded-up windows line long stretches of silent road. At night, prostitutes prowling the corners, passing dealers with stocks of crack, heroin and cocaine.

Sierra, 16, moved from war-ravaged Colombia five years ago, but does not feel much safer in her foster home here. By day, she has to step past weed-smoking toughs who haunt her building's stairwell, and by night, she has to get used to the screaming, whose source she has tired of trying to find.

"It's not a nice neighborhood," she said. "I go in and out quickly; I don't hang around."

But Sierra brightens every Friday afternoon, when she takes the L train to midtown Manhattan for music therapy at the Turtle Bay Music School's Margules program, named after a founding grant from the Annette Margules Endowment Fund. The weekly four-hour sessions combine music with professional psychotherapy used to reach out to emotionally disturbed adolescents in New York's foster care system. Every year, Margules takes in about 25 children between the ages of 11 and 18.

"These kids need a group of their peers, but they also really need individual attention," said Diane Austin, who has headed the Margules program since it was first established at the Turtle Bay School in 1992. "They come from dysfunctional families. ... They're not used to social settings like playing music together or even sitting at the table eating together."

The treatment is diverse; some kids write lyrics, others sing or beat the drums. Every child goes one-on-one with a therapist, followed by a group session. They are bound in a community rooted in song.

Music therapy has been a formal professional discipline for 59 years, offering treatment for a variety of psychological and physical problems, from strokes to autism and for people young and old. The Margules program - the only music therapy program in the city aimed at foster kids - has rebuilt shattered lives, restoring its participants' confidence, in many cases putting them onto steady careers and college degrees.

"It's a very good program," said Alan Turry, co-director of New York University's Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy. "I attended one of their public performances once. I was impressed with their ability to work together and their willingness to share in front of each other. There was a real sense of community. My sense is that often, these kids are so hurt because they've gone through so much rejection, they will sabotage any effort when someone tries to help them. The fact that they're willing to take the risk to share their music publicly is, to me, a sign of their progress."

But now, with city budgets for child-care services slashed, the survival of the 11-year-old program is at stake.

For those like Sierra, the loss of the program could mean a return to an unhappy past. Austin, Sierra's therapist, remembers the girl was emotionally withdrawn before beginning her therapy four years ago. The first time she attended Margules, on a reference from her caseworker, she clung to the bottom of the stairs, refusing to go up to the program's second-floor offices.

"Back then, I hated being around people," she said. "I would get so nervous. Now, I go into a room [full of people], I'll be fine."

The Margules program has been an anchor in her tumultuous life. Sierra's mother was deported from the United States to Colombia on drug charges. In 1998, she sent Sierra to New York for better opportunities, promising to follow shortly.

At first, Sierra stayed with a family friend, who became a foster mother when it became clear that Sierra's own mother was never going to join her. When that family friend could no longer afford to take care of her, Sierra flitted from foster home to foster home - four in five years. None has been stabilizing; her second foster mother, she said, was plainly exploitative.

"She wouldn't give us allowance money or clothes, and used to make us do everything for her," Sierra said. The experience burned into her a cynicism that seems beyond her years. Although she still speaks of her own mother with affection, she is also realistic about her mother's problems, saying, "My mother, she likes nice things the easy way."

Sierra has not seen her mother in five years. For the past four years, the Margules program has been the closest thing in her life to a real family, if only for its constancy. It is where she wrote songs about the father she never met, and the boyfriend - her first - she now dates. It is where she discovered Harry Potter, and where she learned to be herself in a group.

There is a clear bond of affection between Austin and Sierra. In their one-on-one sessions, they talk like girls at a slumber party. Much of the talk is about feelings, mixed with gossip.

They talk, and then they play. Austin encourages Sierra to write lyrics reflecting her mood. Turning the lights low, Austin starts to fit the lyrics to music on a piano, sampling chord after chord with Sierra, like a tailor with a fussy client. When the melody is built, the two sing it through. Then she encourages Sierra to sing alone.

Over time, Sierra's lyrics have shifted. Two years ago, she wrote this: "I never had a father/I always wanted one/Someone I can talk to/Someone who wouldn't run." Of late, adolescence has been catching up: "I'm just a girl/Who wants to hug you/But I'm scared/I don't want to be hurt by you."

For Sierra, the achievement has meant more than rebuilding her confidence to a level where she now confidently sings before strangers. She now plans to become a child therapist herself. "I want to work with children with emotional problems," she said. "Something like what Diane does."

But supporting funds are threatening the Margules program.

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Photos



Mayra Sierra, left, and Diane Austin of Turtle Bay Music School. (Photo by Sune Woods)

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But evaporating funds are threatening the Margules program.

Child care and foster home agencies have been hit hard by cuts in the city budget. One agency, Graham Windham, used to help the Margules program defray its yearly running costs, which can reach \$75,000 for a typical class of 25 kids. No longer. Confronted by a budget deficit of \$6 billion, Mayor Michael Bloomberg had called for city agencies to reduce spending by 9.5 percent for the coming fiscal year, on top of budget cuts already proposed in November and January. The Administration for Children's Services, which oversees agencies like Graham Windham, now faces a \$167.9-million budget cut for the next fiscal year.

"Graham Windham's funding was cut by \$1 million," said Sheri Gottlieb, Turtle Bay's outreach program director. "That impacted all their programs. We were guaranteed \$10,000 from them for the year. They were able to contribute \$5,000 for the fall but not for the spring." Graham Windham also puts up \$200 a week to cover expenses like snacks, games and transport fares. That fund has now dried up.

Slowly throttled, the Margules program has already had to chop four weeks off its original 28-week yearly schedule. It may need to cut more.

"We are trying to keep it going. But we do need an angel to come by and assure us that we could keep it going," Gottlieb said.

It is not as if the Margules program can cut corners by simply reducing sessions, says David Carleton, executive director of Turtle Bay Music School. "To be effective, they cannot just be in a group. ... There must also be one-on-one sessions." With just six therapists in the Margules team and cost-free facilities provided by the increasingly cash-strapped music school, the program is already bare bones.

Margules' small size has been an advantage in forging a familial bond; participating kids have been rallying to write funding appeals to Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the City Council, though thus far in vain. The small size also has been a disadvantage because it has meant low visibility. Other music-therapy centers have leveraged on links with the music industry to finance operations. Nordoff-Robbins, for example, is partly funded by its annual Silver Clef awards dinner, supported by artists such as Neil Young and Jon Bon Jovi.

In the dicey economic climate discouraging traditional funding sources like private foundations, and without the clout to attract big names in the entertainment industry, the Margules program faces death by downsizing, its representatives say. In the end, they say, the children will lose.

Sierra fears this.

"It's not fair," she said. "You get used to somebody and then, poof - they take you out."

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