

## Mama Foundation to expand gospel classes with grant



David Brann / Senior Staff Photographer

MAKIN' MUSIC | Elijah Ahmad Lewis, a vocal instructor; Vy Higginsen, Mama Foundation director and founder; and students Khari Hughes and Lorna Courtney sing at a recent practice.

BY [CHRIS MEYER](#) / Spectator Senior Staff Writer  
 April 15, 11:44pm

To the casual observer, the nondescript brownstone on 126th Street between Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard and Lenox Avenue blends right into the background. But every Friday evening, the headquarters of the Mama Foundation for the Arts emanates choral music so loud you can hear it from a block away.

After receiving a \$40,000 grant from the West Harlem Local Development Corporation, the foundation—which teaches gospel music to local teenagers between the ages of 13 and 19—hopes to expand its recruiting efforts into Community District 9. The grant was one of 83 given to neighborhood organizations in the WHLDC’s recent grant cycle, during which it doled out \$2 million of Columbia’s money.

Since its founding in the early 1980s, the Mama Foundation has emerged as a training ground for dozens of accomplished gospel singers and choirs.

“We wanted to make sure that the music never died, and that young people would be the ambassadors of music,” said Vy Higginsen, founder and director of the Mama Foundation. “They would save this genre of music, and they would pass it on to their families and their children and their children’s children.”

Choirs representing the foundation have performed locally as well as nationally—for the Congressional Black Caucus in Washington D.C., at a TED conference in Long Beach, Calif., and on stage with pop singer Madonna.

In fact, performing live is so common it has become part of the foundation’s curriculum. According to Higginsen, singers join as young as 13, and as long as they demonstrate in tryouts that they can “carry a tune,” they can begin to move through the ranks in the hope of eventually joining a performance choir. Talent scouts go into churches and public schools in order to, in Higginsen’s words, “go straight for the musical kids” and get them excited about the program.

After seeing ads in a gospel newspaper and at her school, Devaire Elmes, 18, joined the program as soon as she was old enough. She said

it provided an escape from the pressures of day-to-day life.

“It doesn’t just becomes a routine, it becomes part of who you are,” she said. “Some people will burst into tears while singing, and after that, you will see a release of energy, and a brightness in their face.”

Higginsen, the daughter of a minister who grew up listening to gospel music in church and on the radio, said the foundation aimed to “balance a musical landscape” dominated by hip-hop, rap, and R&B music, and to reclaim the contributions gospel has made to American music.

“We look at why this particular music has the power to communicate, why it has the power to heal and transform and change your state of mind,” she said. “We want to save this kind of music and make sure it’s never forgotten.”

While the program recruits in Upper Manhattan, leaders plan to expand their efforts into Community District 9, which includes Morningside Heights, Manhattanville, Hamilton Heights, and part of Washington Heights. Higginsen said the area is attractive for the foundation because of the number of public schools, universities, and large apartment complexes within its borders, making it likely the foundation will find “musical kids” there.

Brianna Young, 18, said that emotions before a show often run high, and even the best of friends can get upset with each other right before they go up to start singing—a testament to how seriously Mama Foundation singers take their work.

“If you every come to one of our shows, just take one piece of advice,” Young said. “Do. Not. Come. Backstage.”

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