

His long path brought us 'From the Top'

The Boston Globe

By Susan Chaityn Lebovits, Globe Correspondent | June 8, 2008

Confidence landed Jerry Slavet his own theater troupe. Conviction got him into real estate development. And chutzpah was key in creating "From the Top," a program featuring young classical musicians that is broadcast on public radio and television stations across the country.

Slavet, of Wellesley, and Jennifer Hurley-Wales, of Concord, started "From the Top" in 1998 to celebrate young people who are dedicated to music; the program is in its ninth season on National Public Radio. And "From the Top: At Carnegie Hall," in its second season on PBS, was recently nominated for three Emmy Awards for daytime television.

As executive producers, Slavet and Hurley-Wales have guided "From the Top" into a nonprofit institution that produces school outreach programs, awards scholarships, and collaborates with Macmillan/MacGraw-Hill publishers to tell the stories of its young performers, hoping to inspire children to become involved in the arts.

"Growing up in Mattapan I knew one kid who played the violin, but we found that peculiar," said Slavet, who turns 68 this month, speaking from his Boston office, across the street from the program's host facility, the New England Conservatory.

Slavet went to Boston Latin School and Bowdoin College, where he majored in psychology with a minor in German literature and philosophy. It wasn't until the end of his junior year of college that he attended a performance by a professional classical musician. The following year he answered an ad in a local paper calling for actors. The experience, he said, "was very infectious."

While fulfilling his Reserve Officers' Training Corps duty after college, Slavet was stationed in Providence, and he spent nights and weekends performing Christian-themed plays at the downtown Trinity Church, in the precursor to the Trinity Repertory Company. He next attended Catholic University in Washington, D.C., on a scholarship, and earned a master's degree in theater.

After Slavet graduated from Catholic in 1966, he put together a theater company and went on tour as part of the Armed Forces Professional Entertainment Network Overseas. When he returned to the United States he formed a theater company based at Grace Episcopal Church in Washington's Georgetown section, and soon after took over the Wayside Theater, a small summer-stock troupe in rural Virginia. His casts included future stars such as Susan Sarandon and her then-husband, Chris Sarandon (they met while students at Catholic University), and Kathy Bates.

"We had a blast at the theater," Susan Sarandon said of her time with Slavet. "He was full of energy and courage in his producing."

But wanderlust got the best of him and Slavet accepted another offer from the State Department - this time to do improvisational theater in Indonesia, Burma, and the Philippines.

When Slavet returned, he resigned from the Wayside Theater and moved to Cape Cod with his wife, Susan, and their young daughter.

"I became a waiter at the age of 36, and my wife, a waitress," said Slavet. "We'd go to the beach every day, and empty out all our tips on the bed when we came home at night."

After a few years Slavet wanted more, and he began trekking into New York City with the fancy of becoming a Broadway producer. While struggling, he received a call from the State Department offering a trip to Brazil as a goodwill ambassador for the arts.

Slavet parlayed a three-month contract into an entire year, and traveled around South America with his wife and daughter.

"Once you're there it's easy to sell yourself to the next embassy, as they don't have to pay to bring you down," said Slavet. But when the State Department began talking about sending him to Pakistan, his wife put her foot down. He remembers Susan saying: "We'll be 50 years old and you'll be looking for the next embassy!" In order to save his marriage, the traveling ended.

Slavet returned to Boston and tried his hand in real estate, convincing MB Management Co. to hire him for \$12,000 a year. "I turned my theater resume into all of the business that I'd done," said Slavet. The following year he became a partner, and during his tenure the Braintree-headquartered company has developed more than \$100 million of multifamily housing.

Stephen Roberts, chief executive officer of MB Management, said there are a few things he's learned about Slavet over the years: the first is his unwillingness to take no for an answer; the second, to listen to his off-the-wall ideas.

"Invariably things that seemed nutty to me were actually doable and smart business decisions," said Roberts.

Slavet said he became involved with music through his daughter, Eliza, who played the oboe with the Youth Philharmonic Orchestra at the New England Conservatory.

"I started to go to rehearsals and was intimidated," said Slavet. "When I'd go to the symphony I'd open up the program book and didn't understand a word, or know the proper time to clap."

But listening to Benjamin Zander, the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, work with the young musicians, Slavet said, he began to understand. Next, Slavet volunteered to accompany the group on a tour of Spain, and for the next decade he ran the Youth Philharmonic Orchestra tours that Zander conducted.

By the late 1990s, Slavet was a trustee of the New England Conservatory, and Jennifer Hurley-Wales was the special projects manager. Renovations at Jordan Hall had just finished and they were looking for new uses, including community partners that would make the conservatory more relevant to its neighborhood.

Hurley-Wales said she remembered thinking, "I'm going to talk to that wild board member, Jerry Slavet, who's very entrepreneurial."

Hurley-Wales suggested a radio show and Slavet agreed, recalling the young musicians at conservatory programs who often told him, "I live for Saturday. I'm weird in my school but when I come here I'm with kids who get me."

"Jerry had the insight to see that high school age kids can be a very inviting force in classical music," she said.

The first few years they worked with local youths, and then brought in musicians from all over the country who would submit recordings.

But they still needed more money, so in 1998 Slavet headed to Washington and met with Boston's congressman, J. Joseph Moakley, to ask for a grant.

"From the Top" was awarded a US Department of Education grant for the first season, and then the following three.

"It's a full-time job, but it's my blessing," said Slavet, who still has never drawn a salary for his efforts.

Now the radio show airs on 200 stations around the country, 52 weeks a year, bringing in more than 750,000 listeners. The television show is quickly gaining momentum as well. While Slavet and Hurley-Wales have been approached to do a reality television show or a competition along the lines of "American Idol," they have declined.

"We're here to celebrate kids," said Slavet, "not determine which is more talented."

For more on "From the Top," visit fromthetop.org. To suggest a People subject, e-mail Lebovits@globe.com ■