

Saturday Feb 6, 2021 | 11:18 AM

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White Plains Music Therapist Helps Others by Writing Anthem for Change

February 6, 2021 | Examiner Media | 421 Views | Music Conservatory of Westchester, White Plains | 4 min read

By Sophia Spiegel

It took just one conversation in a New York City subway station for White Plains resident Donald Stevens to develop an even greater appreciation for music and the positive impact it can have on others.

Stevens recently created a new anthem for change while participating in the online show "Date While You Wait."

Set in New York City subway stations, this social experiment was created by Thomas Knox, who invites commuters to play board games while they wait on the platform for their train. He connects with busy New Yorkers on a more intimate level to help empower personal connections.

In October, Stevens, a White Plains resident who works at the Music Conservatory of Westchester, appeared on the show and talked with Knox about his experiences working with children and adults with disabilities.

In the midst of their conversation, Stevens began creating what would be an original song, "You Can Change the World." Within moments, Knox began singing along with Stevens, as the two connected over the joyous tune that was inspired by their conversation.

"I was honored to do this with him. It's great that he's giving hope through music," Knox said.

After the episode was filmed, "Date While You Wait" Executive Producer David Harris Katz encouraged Stevens to finish the song and shoot a music video to celebrate the premise of the show and the positive impact one conversation between strangers can have on the world.

"In our world of distance and isolation, the message of personal connection and the reminder that we all have the power to make positive change rings out," said Lisa Sandagata, director of outreach services of the Music Therapy Institute at the Music Conservatory of Westchester.

Stevens said even if the change isn't monumental, it can potentially alter a person's life for the better, which in turn, can change another life.

Growing up in White Plains, Stevens was always surrounded by music. His father is a musician and singer, his three sisters are all singers and he even has family members in England who are pop stars.

"Music runs real deep in our family, so I have been around music and playing in church my whole life," Stevens said.

Stevens was inspired to become a music therapist after serving as a mental health worker at New York-Presbyterian Hospital. He is one of the few Black American males to earn a master's degree in music therapy from New York University.



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As a music therapist, Stevens works to create an environment that is comfortable for his students, clients and patients so that they can freely express themselves. Over the past 10 years, he has worked in numerous local school districts, engaging weekly with more than 120 students from elementary school to high school. Stevens works closely with teachers, speech pathologists and other medical professionals to help patients cope through music.

He also works with military veterans in the tristate area through the Healing Our Heroes program. Many of the veterans he serves suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and use music therapy to help with their cognitive, psychological and physical recovery.

"It's not just the music that we talk about, we talk about life and how we can apply it," Stevens explained. "I understand the differences between people, have conversations with them, and then turn it into a song, which is one of my philosophies that every conversation is a song."

The transition to virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has posed extensive challenges for Stevens' work, which he acknowledges is more effective in person. Stevens said he hopes he can provide his students and clients with a positive way to cope with the pandemic's stress. The world needs more hope than ever right now, which is his motivation to create an album this year that will be focused on hope and confidence, he said.

Stevens' one conversation with Knox changed his life. On May 3, Stevens will be performing virtually with The New York Songwriters Circle, a community of songwriters who collaborate by sharing and performing their music. He will be singing "You Can Change the World" and two other songs he has written.

"Whatever you have in mind to do, whatever your passion is, whatever your talent is, use it because whatever you have is going to change the world," Stevens said.

To listen to "You Can Change the World" Click [HERE](#).



Donald Stevens, a music therapist at the Music Conservatory of Westchester, created a new anthem for change called "You Can Change the World."

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