

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE CONTACT: Suzanne Palko, 724-263-8324
Abigail Gary, 412-343-0252

Violinist Vijay Gupta Uses Music to Connect with Homeless

As part of the Town Hall South speaker series, musician, educator, and citizen-artist Vijay Gupta spoke on Tuesday, February 4th in the auditorium of Upper St. Clair High School.

Gupta started playing the violin at the age of 3, enrolled in a pre-college program at Juilliard at the age of 7, and performed with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra at 11. After graduating from college at 17, he earned an M.M. from Yale. At 19 he won a place in the first violin section of the Los Angeles Philharmonic over 300 other candidates.

After joining the Philharmonic, Gupta met Nathaniel Ayers, a Juilliard-trained violinist whose mental illness had left him homeless on Skid Row. Gupta met Ayers through Steve Lopez, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times* who did a series on Ayers, which eventually became a book and the movie, *The Soloist*. The experience of knowing and playing music with Ayers changed Gupta's life. Shortly afterwards, he founded Street Symphony, a non-profit organization providing musical engagement, dialogue, and teaching for homeless and incarcerated populations.

In 2018, Gupta was awarded a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant."

In a phone interview, Vijay Gupta talked about what he's learned from music and from working with those who are often invisible and ignored in society.

Q. How did you transition from your music career to your social justice work?

A. Nathaniel Ayers was very much the catalyst for that connection. The truth is I've always seen music and healing as the same. I feel that music is medicine for our soul in a very real way. Meeting Nathaniel, I felt a real immediate connection to him that I sometimes didn't feel as a so-

called professional musician. So Nathaniel was my guide in meeting people to whom I could offer music as a pathway toward healing. I was surprised by how that interaction actually healed me.

Q. Tell me about Street Symphony.

A. Street Symphony is a community of about 90 musicians. Many of them are professionals from ensembles like the LA Philharmonic, many of them are my students, and then some are actually musicians from the Skid Row community, who are either formerly homeless or formerly incarcerated. So Street Symphony is a mixture of all these musicians making music directly for individuals who have or are experiencing homelessness or incarceration. We take these three communities of artists and we perform in Skid Row clinics, shelters, and state prisons throughout southern California. But we also have a robust teaching artist program, where we dedicate musicians from the LA Philharmonic to spend two years in relationship with formerly homeless people and train them to become active musicians in the Street Symphony network, very much like a mentorship program.

Again, this is sort of an exchange. We don't do this work out of charity but out of a place of being in authentic relationship with people who are our neighbors. Our goal is to change the "us & them" narrative and lean into the fact that even homeless people in our community are a part of our community, we are not separated from them, and what's best for them is what's best for us.

We actually have an active process of creating new pieces of music that are informed by the places and people we meet. We have on our staff a composer who was formally homeless himself. He came from the Midnight Mission, which is one of our venues. Much of our work is about taking down the barriers of what we call professional and really listening to the people whom we engage.

Q. So what do you consider success in your outreach program?

A. For us success is in the connection. Success is in the experience, where we have relationships with people that the rest of the world is rather quick to throw away. Because of those experiences we live our

lives differently, we consume things differently, we vote differently. And that's rather unexpected in what we think the power of music can accomplish.

Success is that we want to sound good, we want to be amazing artists, but being an amazing artist is also about building an authentic connection with whomever we're playing for. It's not just about the product of the music, it's about the process of listening. It might seem trite, but success for us is in the experience.

Q. What did you use your MacArthur Foundation grant for?

A. The MacArthur allowed me to take the risky step of leaving my full-time job and to make Street Symphony my life. It also allowed me to donate back a significant portion of my salary and to hire people like the formerly homeless composer. The MacArthur supports me for five years. My first year was 2019, so I'm in the second year of my fellowship.

I feel like the MacArthur is really a calling for me to be as honest with myself as I can possibly be. That is actually not just about Street Symphony, but also about my physical and mental health and investing in my own artistic practice.

Q. What do you hope your audiences at your talks come away with?

A. We live in a world in pain. And I think that when we see our world in pain, we're often at a loss for what to do about that. I hope my message can empower the people that I address to really feel like they can make a difference in their own community. Power really lies with the ability to come together, start conversations, and make change by having those conversations. I hope my talk is an invitation for the Pittsburgh community to identify for itself what it cares about most, not only what the problems are, but what the gifts and assets are. When we think about shifting the lens from problems to possibilities, we can come up with creative solutions for how to make our world a better place.

Subscriptions to next year's Town Hall South series, an outreach of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Upper St. Clair, are available through www.townhallsouth.org. Next year's line-up includes veteran news anchor and journalist Dan Rather on October 6th; Kevin Surace, a Silicon Valley innovator and visionary, on November 10th; global adventurer, inspirational speaker, and host of Netflix's *The Kindness Diaries* Leon Logothetis on December 8th; diplomat, historian, and former TIME editor Richard Stengel, on February 2nd, 2021; and author and professor of animal science Dr. Temple Grandin, who will discuss her personal journey with autism, on March 16, 2021.