

[Jim Luce](#)

Thought Leaders and Global Citizens

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[The Brooklyn Steppers March Forward, Giving to the Community and Gaining in the Process](#)

In high school I had been manager of our marching band in Ohio. It was a grueling task, but rewarding to see my friends play and march so well. The program took much space and resources, and I was surprised last year to discover that there was a marching band in Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn. Known as the [Brooklyn Steppers](#), these urban youth played at a benefit for Orphans International Worldwide ([OIWW](#)) after the earthquake in Haiti. They were sensational!



The Brooklyn Steppers perform across New York - and at the Obama Inauguration.

The Brooklyn Steppers Marching Band is committed to offering once-in-a-lifetime performing opportunities to youth in Brooklyn, while simultaneously supporting their intellectual, civic, cultural and social growth. Under the leadership of Antonio Thompson since last July, the band represents students from different middle schools and high schools across Brooklyn.

I spoke with Antonio last week. With the collapse of the economy, the Brooklyn Steppers budget has fallen from \$300,000 to \$100,000. Like everyone in the non-profit world, Antonio is challenged holding his program together. As a classical and jazz trumpeter with a Masters degree in music performance and arts administration from New York

University, Antonio has a personal connection to music and the arts, and the professional grounding to manage musical programs effectively.



Antonio told me:

Our kids come from schools across Brooklyn - even Queens - and represent students ages 10 - 18. In general, children do not have much access to quality arts instruction in the outer boroughs. In Manhattan and the suburbs resources are substantial - but in Brooklyn they are sadly limited.

Given the collapse of the economy, the number of students we've been able to serve has dramatically decreased and we are in dire need of instruments. Certainly children in the developing world need help with music programs - but the same need exists here in our own city!

For young people growing up in Brooklyn's densely populated urban neighborhoods, the opportunity to experience the possibilities in the arts can provide great benefits to them as they make the transition to adulthood amidst the challenges of inner city life. The Brooklyn Steppers program helps young people develop a better understanding of their cultural environment and promotes community awareness and involvement.

The vision for the Brooklyn Steppers is to be more than just a marching band. By using the arts and the marching band activity as a motivator, we will ensure that every student has the tools needed to graduate from high school, attend college and become successful artists and citizens in the world.

Many of our kids end up at the best historically Black colleges and universities - like Spelman and Morehouse College - in the south, as well as the CUNY system here.

The Brooklyn Steppers perform at many high-profile events, for New York's major sports teams, heads of state and TV shows. This creates the incentive to stay in school to be a part of the action. The Steppers program stresses academic excellence, youth leadership and community service, and the lessons learned in the marching band include responsibility, discipline, and community engagement. Most graduates of the program go on to college at a significant higher rate than the high school population in general.

The Brooklyn Steppers played at the Inauguration of President Barack Obama in Washington and most recently, appeared on an episode of *Law & Order*.



I have met Brooklyn's #1 ambassador many times, Borough President [Marty Markowitz](#), and I asked him how helpful the Steppers were to Brooklyn. He told me:

The world-famous Brooklyn Steppers represent the best in music -- unbelievable moves, moxie, style and real 'Brooklyn Attitude,' which is why presidents, governors, mayors -- and even borough presidents--call on them to get the party started right. The Steppers do Brooklyn proud!



Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz is a fan of the Brooklyn Steppers.

Antonio told me later:

The arts have always been a part of my life. Growing up in the church I started singing in the choir, then became a trumpeter in the band at JHS 113 in Brooklyn. In high school, I continued to play trumpet, but the musical possibilities blossomed after participating in a semester long internship at Jazz at Lincoln Center through the Center for Arts Education's Career Development Program.

Interning in the marketing department introduced me to many famous performers and musicians, and included a few practice sessions with jazz musician Wynton Marsalis. But ultimately, the internship fused my passion for music with a professional skill set. Playing trumpet alongside Mr. Marsalis taught me the essence of work: it is both inspiring and frightening to fathom the time it takes to perfect any skill.

Music has allowed me to express myself and push through to make sure I accomplish my goals. I'm thankful for my mom, a dear friend, and the many mentors over the years who have had a tremendous influence in my life's direction. Without their example and support, I could not have earned a BFA in music performance, a MA in music performance and arts administration, nor pursue another Masters in fundraising at Columbia University.

Now I have the opportunity and responsibility to be a positive role model to youth in Brooklyn. And clearly, I want to be the best role model I can be, offering the strongest arts programming that the Brooklyn Steppers can.

The Brooklyn Steppers have a presence on [Facebook](#). Their next upcoming performance is at Carnegie Hall on May 25 through May 27, part of a city-wide children's event. It is highlighted on the Hall's [website](#).



The Brooklyn Steppers perform frequently at community events in New York City.

The Brooklyn Steppers played at the Orphans International Worldwide Haiti Benefit at Webster Hall in February. Antonio wrote us a nice note following their performance, thanking us, when in fact it was we who needed to thank him:

Congratulations on your benefit for Haiti, and thank your allowing the Brooklyn Steppers Marching Band to join you. Our organization is proud to have been able to offer an energetic and pulsating performance to kick off the event and I hope you enjoyed it.

The work of Orphans International Worldwide and the United Nations around the world truly exemplifies the meaning of the phrase global community. If each of us took a small step to make the world a safer, cleaner and better place for all, the change would be monumental.

On behalf of the students we serve, thank you for all that you have done and continue to do around the world, especially for the children of Haiti. I have attached a brief informational sheet about the Brooklyn Steppers and the programs we provide to children in Brooklyn. Let's keep in touch! We would love to work with you again in the future.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to participate and for allowing the Brooklyn Steppers to "step it out" for Haiti.



Antonio Thompson of the Brooklyn Steppers Marching Band is a musical thought leader whose presence in New York City is offering hope and opportunity to innumerable youth who are learning life lessons that will provide the next generation of leadership for our city and state. He is to be commended - and funded - so that he may continue to do the incredible work that the Brooklyn Steppers are known for.