

THE ARTS

Rick Sperling

Mosaic Youth Theatre founder uses the stage to lift children's lives

Three times a week, talented Detroit youths come together as actors and choristers of the Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit. But as the program's founder-CEO Rick Sperling watches the youngsters working together — committed to each other, practiced at their craft, striving toward their potential — he sees not just their present achievement but their future and a meaningful place in the world for each of them.

For 16 years, Sperling has guided his kids — as many as 1,000 each year — through the creative and self-disciplining experience that is Mosaic. He has taken them on performance tours of Africa and Asia, and twice to Europe. He has watched them become self-reliant, watched his high standards become their own reference points as more than 90 percent of Mosaic alumni graduate from high school and go on to college.

However, he will tell you the real index of Mosaic's achievement is the lives these kids ultimately make for themselves, the places they carve in the world as artists and educators and leaders.

"I've seen young people who were never planning to go to college get into Ivy League schools or Juilliard," he says. "Many of our kids have called Mosaic the most transformational experience of their teenage years."

Sperling was inspired to create a performing arts program for young adults in 1992, when he saw the arts being chopped from the Detroit Public Schools' curriculum.

"But in the end, it's not simply about the arts," he says. "It's about empowerment. It's about developing the courage to put yourself out there and try to accomplish something you can take pride in."

Two former Detroit News Michigianians of the Year say Sperling's importance to the kids who have passed through Mosaic exceeds measure.

"Rick has shown how one person really can make a differ-



ence in this world,” says Shirley Stancato, president and CEO of New Detroit, a race-relations advocacy group that last year gave its Closing the Gap award to Mosaic.

“I’ve known Rick for years, and he’s tireless, absolutely dogged in his drive to nourish these young kids,” says Steve Hamp, a community leader in arts and education and the former president of The Henry Ford.

“Rick’s a visionary, a superstar.”

— *Lawrence B. Johnson / Special to The Detroit News*

Age: 42
Residence: Detroit
Occupation: Founder and CEO, [Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit](#)
Education: Bachelor's degree, Oberlin College
Family: Wife, Valeria Montes; one daughter
Honored: For inspiring self-discipline, a sense of teamwork and high personal standards in thousands of Metro Detroit children through Mosaic Youth Theatre

