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Sophomore Joel Gordon plays a saxophone solo during a Trouble Clefs concert July 23 at a Kansas City shopping center. Gordon performed with and conducted the group, which performed funk, rock and Latin arrangements in addition to classic jazz pieces.

Student jazzes up Kansas City

Students extend jazz studies beyond the classroom with a summer ensemble

BY EMILY BATTMER

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When sophomore Joel Gordon set out to start his own music group this summer, he went beyond performance and implemented his love of teaching others and preserving the American art form of jazz.

Gordon, a music and business administration major at Truman State, spent his summer creating, conducting and playing with a student-facilitated jazz band called the Trouble Clefs.

The group consists of 18 core members from seven different Kansas City high schools, he said. Gordon said he wanted to create a low-pressure learning environment for future music educators, producers and performers while promoting the art of American jazz.

"For some, this is a stepping stone to being a professional musician, and for others, it's just an opportunity to get together with friends and play great music," he said.

The teaching experience he gained from working with the band has been irreplaceable, he said. Not only has the band given him the opportunity to practice coaching a musical group, but he said he also has been exposed to unforeseen problems and has learned how to manage obstacles.

The band is entirely student-run, Gordon said, which gives the group a distinct edge. Members range in age from 17 to 21, and these young musicians are directly responsible for picking their own songs and booking their own concerts. Gordon said he does not know of any other groups in Kansas City like the Trouble Clefs. He said their first show took place in a friend's backyard and drew about 75 attendees.

Since then, the band has performed throughout Kansas City at churches, shopping centers, parks, retirement homes and festivals.

Gordon said the band is wrapping up the summer season with one last concert at the Trails West Arts Festival August 17 in St. Joseph, Mo. After that, the musicians will head back to school — some as far as Florida, Tennessee and Wisconsin. While the band is taking a hiatus for the academic year, Gordon said they hope to start again next May and have another



Senior Shelley Washington, left, plays baritone saxophone June 7 during the Trouble Clef's first performance in a friend's back yard. Sophomore Joel Gordon, right, performs with the group June 25 at the Pine Ridge Presbyterian Church in Kansas City. Members of the group ranged in age from 17 to 21.

great summer of music.

"Overall, I've gained friendships that will last a long time," Gordon said. "I'm already eager for next summer."

Truman senior Shelley Washington said she also was able to meet new people from the Kansas City area and make contacts through her involvement with Trouble Clefs. Washington, a music education major and saxophone player, said she played baritone and alto saxophones, sang and occasionally conducted the band.

She said the experience she gained as the oldest member of the group will be helpful for her throughout the future.

"Getting to conduct in front of [the band] was fairly similar to what it will be like conducting a high school band,



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which is what I hope to do with my life," she said.

Washington said playing with a jazz band is different from playing with other ensembles because it is such a tight-knit group. Most classical and western music was created abroad, she said, but jazz is all-American music and she thinks it is important for musicians to have a love for the art form.

"You have to play with a lot of skill, but you also have to play with a lot of

heart, which is really important for any musician," Washington said. "Jazz lends itself well to that."

Heartfelt performance is something that Washington fears many musicians lack when they focus on technicalities, but she said Gordon brought that to the band when he formed the Trouble Clefs. She said he is "cut out" for the job of handling a jazz band.

"He is really on top of his game," she said. "Not only did he get the group together, he got all of our music, made us custom stands, got us gigs to play and ran rehearsals."

Gordon credits senior Bryan Foote with inspiring him to start his own jazz band. Foote said he plays with two jazz ensembles in St. Louis, both comprised of about 50 percent college and high school students. One of the groups is directed by a college music student, he said.

Foote and Gordon played in the same jazz group last spring and shared the idea that jazz is a genre that creates a positive experience for both the performers and the audience, Foote said. When he talked to Gordon about his own experiences in his ensembles, Gordon said he ran with the idea.

Foote said he is impressed with Gordon's leadership and his creation of an entirely student-facilitated big band. Playing in extra ensembles that aren't tied to school gives musicians more freedom and provides an outlet for their talents, he said.

"It's great to sit at home and practice in your room and know all your scales, but it's another thing to actually get out in the public and play, not only for your own enjoyment, but for the audience," Foote said.

Elements of jazz are incorporated into more popular forms of music, Foote said, and young musicians bring the genre to life. Living, breathing people play every part in a jazz song, and that makes it more personal for the musicians and the audience, he said.

"It's cultured, it's interesting and it's definitely quite different from the kind of music people are exposed to these days," he said. "I think that's one reason why it's so inviting for young people."



Alumnus brings experience to faculty

BY KATE LINMAN

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Truman State hired 24 professors this semester, but Khang Tran brings knowledge which most new professors don't have — he knows what it is like to be a Truman student.

Tran graduated from Truman during 2006 with mathematics and computer science degrees. He received his doctorate at the University of Illinois—Champaign this month and was hired at Truman to teach this semester.

As an undergraduate, Tran said he knew he wanted to teach. "Truman was certainly my first choice when I was applying for a job," Tran said. "It's just really lucky that Truman had a position open when I graduated."

Hired as a temporary professor in the mathematics department, Tran has a one-year

contract with the school, which could be renewed at the end of the year. Tran will teach two sections of calculus and two sections of college algebra this semester.

Tran said it felt natural for him to come back to Truman as a professor.

"It's a good thing that I studied over here because I already know so many professors over here," he said. "I'm really familiar with the environment so it's really easy for me to talk to professors."

Tran said he thinks his familiarity with the university and its professors will help him feel comfortable asking experienced professors about how to handle classes and other professor responsibilities.

"I think as a professor I have more responsibility, of course," Tran said. "I have my teaching duties, making sure students

understand my lectures, making sure my research is going fine."

Jon Gering, Dean of the School of Sciences and Mathematics, said professors who graduated from Truman frequently bring a desire to supply their students the type of education they received when they were students. He said they also have knowledge of the Kirksville and Truman communities, buildings and people on campus that new faculty don't have.

Gering also said Truman graduates can bring an image of past success to Truman faculty.

"Imagine if you were a faculty member and you had an excellent student in one of your classes or several of your classes, maybe you were a mentor to that student, and they go off and get a Ph.D. and six years later they become a member of your department," Gering said. "You have to think you had a part in



Rose Sparks/Index

Professor Khang Tran sits on the porch swing outside Ezra C. Grim Hall, the dorm he lived in when he was a student. Tran recently was hired to teach calculus and college algebra.

that student's success ... That has to feel good."

Janet L. Gooch, Dean of the School of Health Sciences and Education, said professors like Tran offer a distinctive perspective to students.

"I think they understand Tru-

man most of the time," she said. "I think they love Truman and that's why they apply for the position. They often times have that benefit of experiencing Truman for what it is and have a unique ability to pass that on to Truman students."