

LOOKING AT THE STARS

INSPIRING CANADIAN INMATES THROUGH CLASSICAL MUSIC

by GREGORY FINNEY



DMITRI KANOVICH
FOUNDER AND CEO

“I’m no different than anybody else, except that I am,” Dmitri Kanovich chuckles over coffee on King Street East in Toronto.

In one way he is quite individual: In 2015 he founded Looking at the Stars, a charity that brings world-class classical music performances into correctional facilities across Ontario.

A former refugee who moved to Canada in 1983, Lithuanian-born Kanovich arrived with two kids and \$300 in his pocket.

He also came with his work ethic. After a short stint of odd jobs, he was hired by the “compassionate” owner of a small IT company he met at his synagogue. Ten years later, the whole company was working for him.

Kanovich turned his two master’s degrees (in economics and mathematics) into a successful career as a programmer and IT professional all the way up to senior executive. At one point he was chief information officer (CIO) for one of Nortel’s divisions. “I started from nothing and earned my stripes,” he says with a smile.

In 1997 he found himself in the United States and shortly thereafter began travelling the world. He returned to Canada in 2014.

“After all that travel, I reconfirmed that Canada was the best country in the world,” he says. “I made money. I knew my next step was to give back.”

Disheartened by what he described as a worldwide epidemic of cruelty, anger, animosity and isolation, Kanovich wanted to find a way to battle the indifference he saw around the globe.

“The way was through music,” he says. “That’s what led me to start the organization.”

Aware personally of the uplifting power of music, Kanovich was disturbed that it was no longer a priority in public schools. Students could graduate without knowing who Mozart was.

The idea of bringing the music to people, instead of the other way around, came to him as he thought about his own life.

“I’m no different,” he says of the inmates who attend the concerts. “If I made different choices, I could have been where they are.”

Kanovich decided that he was going to “put his money where his mouth is.” He bought a grand piano for the first concert in the prison in Bath, Ontario.

“We had a world-class pianist, Lukas Geniušas, one of the best in the world, really, in his tuxedo, and they loved it.”

The audience’s reaction surprised Kanovich in a few ways. “One guy asked, ‘Why is he in a tux?’ I answered, ‘Why not, don’t you deserve it?’”

From that point on, Kanovich has felt an affinity with the inmates who come to his shows.

“I feel at home in prison,” he says, “they listen there. They appreciate what we do. They appreciate that we haven’t abandoned them.”

One of the benefits of a program like this is that it offers inmates a chance to offer feedback on the event. The response from the inmates has been overwhelmingly positive.

From those with extensive experience with classical music to others with very little exposure to any live music, the program is clearly resonating with them.

“The music made me forget about the effects of the prison environment for the duration of the performance and relieved some of the tensions of this type of environment,” writes one attendee. “It gave a chance to relax the mind.”

“It was *all* my favourite part” writes another inmate, who has been in prison for more than eight years. “I’m sure you can understand when I say I feel lost and forgotten.”

Yet another inmate writes of the inaugural performance in Bath: “The power of music knows no limitations. I close my eyes and feel my heart begin to pound harder and louder, filling my chest with vibrations long lost in time, igniting that fire I need to keep living.”

Kanovich says of the prisoners: “They feel abandoned. I want to bring them love. They still deserve that.”

The fire in Kanovich’s eyes starts to grow as he describes reading Victor Hugo’s classic *Les Misérables* after turning 50: “I used to read it like an adventure, but it’s a philosophical book.”

He calls it “a testament” that teaches to give and not to judge.

Ultimately, Kanovich would like to see Looking at the Stars grow into a Canada-led, global initiative in correctional facilities. With former premier Bob Rae as the organization’s chair, Kanovich works tirelessly with prisons, artists, artist managers, piano suppliers and others to ensure that these inmates are treated to a top-notch performance.

Of course there are expenses. Kanovich doesn’t mind the financial burden but understands the need for an organization to diversify its funding. A registered charity, Looking at the Stars now produces 10 to 12 concerts a year in various institutions across Ontario and is moving into Quebec.

“We want to keep growing,” he says. The organization has launched a crowdfunding campaign for its next event in April.

“My style was always to go against the tide,” Kanovich says. “How can I make the world better? I wanted to do something unconventional. The world needs to realize it’s beneficial for all of us. It’s what we all should be doing.” **LSM**

For information go to www.lookingatthestars.org. To make a donation go to the crowdfunding campaign, go to www.gofundme.com/inspire-bath-inmates