



Masters and apprentices in the Missouri Folk Arts Program's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, now celebrating its 30th anniversary. Left: 1994, master Catherine Saunders of Shelbina teaches the art of tatting lace. Right: 2013, old-time fiddler Travis Inman of Sedalia plays back-up guitar for apprentice Brett Dudenhoeffer of Marshfield. — photo by Deborah A. Bailey

[MISSOURI ARTS COUNCIL](#) • MAY 2015

## Masters and Apprentices Strengthen Missouri's Folk Arts Web

by *Barbara MacRobie*

"One of my favorite moments since I became director of the Missouri Arts Council's Missouri Folk Arts Program," said Lisa Higgins, "was in spring 2007 when we opened *Work Is Art and Art Is Work*. We created this traveling exhibit about luthiery—the making, repair, and restoration of stringed instruments. Our exhibit featured photos, videos, and instruments from six Missouri luthiers. The first stop on the exhibit's statewide tour was West Plains during the Old-Time Music, Ozark Heritage Festival.

"So all six luthiers are on hand for the grand opening. I'm standing up at the podium talking about 'these artists—these wonderful artists—these master artists.' And later I hear that one of them, Luke Medley, whispered to Kathleen Morrissey, head of the West Plains Council on the Arts: 'Is she talking about *us*?'"



Master Luther Medley, Poplar Bluff, fiddle making — photo by Rita A. Reed

Luke was renowned until his death in 2013 as a maker of string basses that he especially designed for the quick finger-picking style of bluegrass playing. For him, as for many other masters of traditional arts, "his art was just part of his ordinary life," Lisa said. He once told [Rural Missouri](#), "I just like making them and getting a little fishing money." But not only did he make dozens of "doghouse" upright basses, he passed along his skills to apprentices he trained through what Lisa says is the heart of the Missouri Folk Arts Program: the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program.

The concept of the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP) is simple and profoundly effective. For about nine months, a master artist meets frequently and works closely with an apprentice artist to impart the master's knowledge and to develop the apprentice's skills.

“Ideally, TAAP is meant to end up with an apprentice who is so good and so recognized in their own community as an excellent artist that they will also teach others,” said Deborah Bailey, MFAP folk arts specialist. Many former apprentices have done just that, some even in their turn becoming TAAP masters—forging another set of living links in the chain of Missouri’s folk arts.

## Hundreds of artists during 30 years

In 2015, TAAP celebrates its 30th anniversary. Since the first lesson took place on December 10, 1984, there have been 374 apprenticeships in which 185 master artists have mentored more than 400 apprentices in every region and every type of community in the state.

Among the arts that have been fostered are cowboy poetry, blacksmithing, African-American storytelling, paddle carving, short-bow fiddling, traditional Irish singing, boot and saddle making, Vietnamese dragon dancing, wheelwrighting, “walking cane” dulcimer, clawhammer banjo, wood joinery, square dance calling, bobbin lace, turkey calls, bluegrass dobro, Mexican paper flowers, Slovenian button-box accordion, and Native American ribbon work.



Left, apprentice Alicia Jones; Right, master Doris Frazier, Chesterfield – African-American gospel singing and piano

Some arts are traditional regional crafts that date back to Missouri’s Native American peoples and first European settlers. Some are arts of new immigrants—Latin-American, Sudanese, Bosnians. “Missouri has such a broad range of cultures and diversity of communities,” said Deb.

The 2015 masters are a typically diverse spread:

- Bob Alexander, blacksmithing, DeSoto
- Donovan Bailey, jazz drumming, Kansas City
- Jeff Bottiger, making of embellished powder horns for long-rifle makers and reenactors, Edgar Springs
- Travis Inman, old-time “Little Dixie”-style fiddling, Sedalia
- Vesta Johnson, old-time Northern Missouri-style fiddling, Kirkwood
- Oliver Kenyi, South Sudanese *Murye* tradition of dancing and drumming, Kansas City
- Dona McKinney, Southern Plains tribal regalia for pow-wow dances, Holts Summit

“All these traditional arts,” said Lisa, “put together the materials of everyday life in ways that are both functional and beautiful.”

## Delving in depth

Part of why TAAP succeeds, said Deb, is that it structures and supports the natural way in which traditional skills are passed along. “The teaching mimics what goes on in a traditional culture,” she said. “But in TAAP the meetings are not haphazard and intermittent, but regular and one-on-one. So apprentices are able to advance their skills in a significant way.”

Master artist Carmen Dence has experienced this in the four apprenticeships she has led on the dances and dance costumes of her native Colombia. An associate professor of radiology at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, she is also the founder and director of Grupo Atlantico, her



dance troupe promoting Caribbean folklore and heritage, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2015. “For my apprentices, I have been able to pay finer attention to the details,” she said. “For my regular Grupo Atlantico dancers, I might only have time to add a few lines— ‘this dance came from so-and-so’—because they are there to learn the choreography. But my apprentices get the whole story behind the dance, the history of the movements and the traditions. I even assign small papers to them they need to research to understand in a deeper way.”

One of Carmen’s apprentices was Norka Carr, who also co-directed Grupo Atlantico for several years. Norka grew up in Colombia and Venezuela. Especially through the apprenticeship, she said, “it was wonderful to reconnect with my roots through the dances I learned when I was little, the music I used to hear and dance with my family, and to put in practice the sewing and designing skills I learned at school and with my mother and grandmother.”



Master Carmen Dence, St. Louis – Colombian dance

The apprenticeships helped Carmen herself learn more about her own traditions. “When I came to Florida for graduate school,” she said, “the first thing I did when I had a chance was buy a sewing machine and make myself a Colombian dress. That was as important to me as passing my qualifying exams and starting graduate school, but at that time, I didn’t even know there was a name for ‘traditional arts.’ I only knew I was so passionate about the dance and music I had learned in the festivals in Barranquilla where I grew up.

“The apprenticeships have helped me study more deeply what I had learned by tradition only. It has been a long learning experience and reassessment of the traditions and the cultural value of the dances.”



Left, master Ed Harper, Browning; Right, apprentice Matthew Barnett – blacksmithing

## “Hub of the wheel”

TAAP is so much the core of the Missouri Folk Arts Program that TAAP was established nearly a decade before MFAP itself. “TAAP was under the auspices of the Cultural Heritage Center at the University of Missouri in Columbia,” Lisa said. “When the economic downturn of the early ‘90s forced the Center to be disbanded, the Missouri Arts Council—which had supported TAAP from the beginning—really wanted to continue the folk arts program. The University’s Museum of Art and Archaeology was also very interested. The Museum and the Council worked together, and in 1993 today’s Missouri Folk Arts Program was born.”

Officially, Lisa said, “MFAP is a program of the Missouri Arts Council that is administered by the Museum.” The program is funded, as it has been since TAAP began in 1984, by the Council and by the National Endowment for the Arts. Unlike the rest of the Council’s staff, who are based in St. Louis, MFAP staff are based in Columbia. In addition to Lisa as director and Deb as folk arts specialist, the staff includes a graduate research assistant, a graduate student intern, and a work-study student.

Lisa first came on board in 1994 as the intern when she was a graduate student studying folklore. “It was clear to me then how important the apprenticeship program was,” she said. “When I came back in 1999 as director, TAAP was in its 15th year, so there was already this great legacy. There was so much depth with TAAP that all MFAP’s other projects could build off it in some way.”

Kindred spirit Deb Bailey joined the staff in 2000. “We have both always been clear that TAAP is the hub of the wheel,” Lisa said. “Even in years when funding has been lean, we have kept this program going.”

MFAP’s current programs include various projects in elementary and high school education. Every April for the past 27 years, MFAP has collaborated with the Department of Natural Resources’ Missouri State Museum in Jefferson City to produce “Tuesdays at the Capitol,” bringing artists to the museum to do hands-on demonstrations for schoolchildren. The artists are all masters and apprentices with TAAP. “We’ve also done some folk arts in-school residencies. All the artists we’ve relied on have been involved in TAAP.”

MFAP manages the Missouri Arts Council’s folk arts grants, which are awarded to Missouri-based nonprofits to conserve and showcase folk arts in local communities by means of concerts, festivals, workshops, exhibits, and other events. “Some of those reflect back on TAAP as well. Like the Bethel Youth Fiddle Camp—at least five of the teachers have previously been in TAAP.” Some of the presenters in MFAP’s ongoing Community Scholars Workshop Series are also TAAP masters and apprentices.

## Enmeshed in community

“Folk arts can be that outsider, self-taught, do-it-yourself thing,” Lisa said. “Or it can be the way we do it: living traditions passed down in community.”

Webs of community connections are vital not only to sustain the traditions but to locate masters who could qualify for the program. “We have a lot of strength in our alumni,” Lisa said. “Artists tell other artists they know—‘hey, have you considered applying?’”

Folk arts events and immigrant/refugee organizations have helped TAAP discover artists and traditions of which staff had been unaware. “The Old-Time Music Festival and the Big Muddy Folk Festival in Boonville have recommended artists. African organizations in Kansas City and the International Institute of St. Louis have often referred artists to apply to us.”

The master-apprentice teams are not created by MFAP staff. Masters find their own apprentices. Together the teams make their application for the program.



Left, apprentice Nick Andresevic; Right, master Robert Pinter, Sugar Creek – Croatian tamburitza



Just like other Missouri Arts Council grants, TAAP applications are reviewed by an independent panel of volunteers who score the applications for many criteria. The applications include work samples from both master and apprentice, and detailed plans for the proposed course of lessons. The highest-scoring applications are the ones funded. "The number of teams varies depending on how much funding we have," Lisa said.

Key to the program's success is that apprentices are not rank beginners. "Deb and I have written into the guidelines that their skills must be at least at an intermediate level," Lisa said. "They must have a relationship with the master that's been established for more than a couple of months. With limited resources, we want the most impact in order to truly sustain the tradition."

That need for in-depth concentration makes repeat performances by masters, sometimes even with the same apprentices, an advantage. "Artists who want to repeat do need to make a compelling case. But a lot of times, especially with older artists, the masters have so much knowledge. That's why somebody like fiddler Vesta Johnson will come in as a master several times. If we want somebody else to know those tunes, and how to bow like she does, it's an asset every time she's in the program."

## Essential boost

Though 92-year-old Vesta Johnson teaches out of her own home and at the Bethel Youth Fiddle Camp every summer, she has never run her own fiddle school. She spent the career years of her life raising her family and working at electrical and printing companies. "That's typical for most of our artists," said Deb. "They are school bus drivers, farmers, housewives, local mayors, retirees.... Most do not have full-time jobs as artists. Some work two or three jobs.

"The little bit of financial support TAAP provides gives the master time to be able to focus on the apprentice. The supply and travel money we give apprentices makes it possible for them to do the apprenticeship. If the craft is, say, saddlemaking, things like wood and leather are expensive. The master can't necessarily afford to give away the materials, and the apprentice doesn't necessarily have the money to pay for them."



Left, master Christa Robbins, Dixon; Right, apprentice Kaylene Peterson – German bobbin lace (*Kloppelei*). Kaylene was Christa's granddaughter and at age 10 the youngest apprentice ever accepted into the program. "She had begged her family to be taught. They told her she was too young," Lisa said. "She was stubborn. She got pixie sticks and yarn and a couch pillow, and tried to teach herself. At first we were dubious, too—but she wrote her part of the application herself, and it was great!" Christa Robbins had brought the 400-year-old art with her when she immigrated from Germany. She taught 14 apprentices in TAAP before she died in 2006.



Left, master Martin Bergin, Overland; Right, apprentice Mike Massey, Montgomery City – saddlemaking





Second from left, master Mulu Wani Evans, Kansas City, with apprentices – Kuku percussion, song, and dance

Deb cited the recent apprenticeships with members of the Kuku tribe in Kansas City. “They are originally from the South Sudan. Like many new immigrant groups, they have gone through severe cultural and geographic dislocations where normal social life and expressive culture goes by the wayside,” she said.

“They endured many years of civil war. Some were kids when they had to flee their villages. They ended up in refugee camps where they were very much the minority. Now there are about 1,500 of them in Kansas City. They’re trying to reconstruct what they know in their new context, and to teach their young people their culture. If there was ever a need for an apprenticeship to help people put things back together, this is it.”

Fortunately, some Kuku in Kansas City did know the dance, drumming, and singing traditions. “TAAP was able to pay the master and for room rental in a community center. They can’t practice at home because the drums are so loud—somebody would call the police! Not only the formal apprentices have shown up for the lessons, but a lot of other people too. They want others to know about their culture, so they’re beginning to do some performances outside their own community, like at the Big Muddy Festival in Boonville.

“Without all the little elements that TAAP makes possible, this tradition would be in danger. This is when you know you’re doing a good thing!”

## Endangered but alive

Just like the Kuku traditions, there are longstanding regional Missouri traditions that have become fragile but have been bolstered by TAAP. For instance, the long, low, wooden boats



Right, apprentice Nathan Gordon; Left, master Cecil Murray, Doniphan – johnboats

known as johnboats were the classic way to navigate Ozark rivers, until the advent of canoes and aluminum boats. "I can honestly say that the interest in johnboats among locals has returned a bit because of TAAP," said Deb. "Cecil Murray, who has been a master in johnboat building and paddle carving seven times, has actually sold a couple of boats this year."

Though johnboats first floated over the riverways in the early 1900s, Cecil Murray doesn't hesitate to use 21st-century tools to build his boats. "When it comes to folk arts," said Lisa, "a lot of people immediately think of historic and heritage arts. Certainly the folk arts have history and heritage. But these are living traditions. They are still practiced today, and they are so important in the lives of these artists. They are dynamic, not fixed in time."

"Sure, some artist may occasionally dress up in costume and do something just of the time period. But that doesn't mean they don't go back to the shop and use electricity!"

## Plans and dreams for the future

MFAP's stated mission is "to build cross-cultural understanding by documenting, conserving and presenting our state's living folk arts and folklife in collaboration with Missouri's citizens." In keeping with documenting, MFAP staff visit each team during the apprenticeship armed with cameras and audio recorders.

"We keep these records in archival boxes and back them up digitally," said Lisa. "We have probably 10 years in the office. The rest has gone to the State Historical Society of Missouri, where we have a collection. Scholars can go in and look at photos and listen to recordings." But Lisa wants the records to be accessible to everyone.

"I would love to have funding to digitize our records and make them available online. And then to get the rest of what we have here in order, so we can transfer it. That's labor-intensive and expensive work."

MFAP's website has a small taste of what Lisa has in mind in the online exhibit [Master Artists, Master Teachers](#).

For MFAP's 25th anniversary, graduate students Darcy Holtgrave and Claire Schmidt put together profiles of artists who had participated in TAAP at least five times as masters. Each profile includes photos and audioclips of the masters and apprentices at work. "You can hear their voices, hear their interaction."

During 2015, MFAP is embarking on another effort to showcase TAAP in a different way. "We will be focusing on apprentices who are now recognized as masters," Lisa said. "We're going to call this *Then and Now*. We'll bring a couple of artists here to Columbia and have a performance combined with a public Q&A interview. We want to record those performances and interviews, edit them, and turn the material into short videos we can host on our website."

Amping up public programs with TAAP artists is a priority. "In addition to Tuesdays at the Capitol and the Big Muddy Folk Festival in Boonville, which we've done for more than 20 years," Lisa said, "we've been encouraging artists to help us identify a venue in their own community where they can do a performance or demonstration. Maybe a festival or an event at a library. It's great to get them recognized at the state



Left, master Frank Patterson, Kansas City; Right, apprentice Keith Johnson  
— gospel and jazz saxophone



capital, but they should be recognized in their own communities too.”

Whether masters and apprentices are performing onstage for an audience or practicing by themselves in a farmhouse kitchen, the intense bonds between them are crucial for the continued life of Missouri’s folk arts.

“When I go on site visits,” said Deb, “I see the growing relationships. The lesson plan may call for an hour, but the lesson goes on for two hours... or four or five. So many of these relationships are permanent, with apprentices continuing on with the master way past their year in TAAP.



Left, master Joe Hijoe, Carthage; Right, apprentice Nolan Negrette  
– Navajo silversmithing

“Each team is different—they find their own way. But when you’re working one-on-one on a regular basis, relationships are bound to get closer. Which only strengthens what they’re ultimately trying to accomplish.”

## Experience TAAP live and online

[MFAP's website](#) is a trove of information and stories about TAAP, including these features:

- [Interview](#) on KBIA-FM with Deborah Bailey and master blacksmith Bernard Tappel at his forge
- [Virtual exhibits/slideshows](#): *Master Artists*, *Master Teachers* about the five-times-plus masters, *The First 25* Years photo galleries, and *Work Is Art*, *Art Is Work* about master Missouri luthiers
- [Publications](#) and articles from the Museum of Art and Archaeology’s magazine

Two live [special events](#) in late May and early June in partnership with Missouri State Parks and Historic Sites celebrate “TAAP @ 30” with performances and demonstrations by alumni from 1985 to 2014.

- Saturday, May 30, 1-4 PM – Current River State Park near Salem. Old-time fiddling, clawhammer banjo, storytelling, gig-making.
- Saturday, June 6, 10 AM–1 PM. Roaring River State Park near Cassville, in conjunctions with Kids’ Free Fishing Day. Old-time music jam, custom bootmaking demonstrations and more.

*All images are courtesy of the Missouri Folk Arts Program.*

*Masters and Apprentices Strengthen Missouri’s Web of Folk Arts* was created in May 2015 for the [Missouri Arts Council](#), a state agency and division of the Department of Economic Development. The Missouri Arts Council provides grants to nonprofit organizations that meet our strategic goals of increasing participation in the arts in Missouri, growing Missouri’s economy using the arts, and strengthening Missouri education through the arts. Contact [moarts@ded.mo.gov](mailto:moarts@ded.mo.gov).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#). Please feel free to share and distribute. Attribution: Courtesy of the Missouri Arts Council, a state agency.

**Missouri Arts Council**  
**50th Anniversary**  
**1965 – 2015**

*As part of our celebration,  
during this year we are telling  
stories of many other milestone  
anniversaries in our state.*