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# Trust Tree Cranks Up the Girl Power

by **Jess Ardrey** on **June 29, 2020**

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FROM LEFT: Melanie Castellano, Correne Spero and Jordan Wolf

"If I had a nickel for every time I heard that."

Correne Spero shakes her head with a laugh.

That knowing smile has grown accustomed to hearing other women express how much they would have loved to participate in a program like Trust Tree, an arts and leadership program for girls that Spero directs and co-founded with Melanie Castellano and Jordan Wolf.

And while at first glance the "arts and leadership program" label can sound a little lackluster, consider the trio started as bandmates — members of Daughters of Triton, or DOT — whose own "kinetic punk" sound the Fayetteville Flyer once described as "a midwestern DIY version of The B52s."

Naturally, the idea for Trust Tree sprouted in band practice from a conversation about the lack of other all-girl bands in their performing circuits.

"As much as you want to think things are getting better and progress is moving forward in this linear way for women and girls, it still feels like a vacuum sometimes," Spero says. "We thought maybe we could help inspire the next generation of girls to get out there and not feel so shy, and to get the memo earlier than we did."

In 2017, the first Trust Tree summer session was held in Spero's living room with eight campers in tow, on board for the new nonprofit's mission to help girls ages 9-16 build confidence through songwriting and art projects.

Today the technicolored, sparkle-fringed world of Trust Tree is less "Love Shack" and more a Flaming Lips concert of girl power. The University of Arkansas - Pulaski Technical College provides a classroom and five small practice spaces for summer camp sessions, which are hardly recognizable by the time the team is done with them.



Katie Childs Photo

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FEBRUARY 2022						
Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa
		1	2	3	4	5
6	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28					

**MAR 1** Terror Tuesdays: "House on Haunted Hill"

**MAR 1** "School Girls," or "The African Mean Girls Play"

**MAR 3** Verona Quartet

**MAR 5** 20th Annual Little Rock Marathon, Half Marathon, 10K, 5K & Little Rockers Final Mile

**MAR 5** An Evening with the Legends of Radio -- Live & Uncensored

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- From Z to A: 3 Heart-Healthy Recipes That Don't Skimp on Flavor
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- Mardi Gras Comes to South Main on Saturday
- Girl Scout Cookie Week Is Taking Over Little Rock Restaurants
- Monster Bash



"Really the whole vibe came out of necessity," Castellano says. "We're inviting girls into a blank classroom and gray, windowless boxes and asking them to be creative."

"I call Melanie the Dollar Tree Queen," Spero laughs, adding that all of Trust Tree's team, including music facilitator Hope Findlay and communications guru Keesha Bass, come with their own cocktail of education, music and arts experience. Spero is a certified ESL teacher while Castellano, who heads up Trust Tree's music program, is a teacher at Parkview Arts and Science Magnet High School and Wolf, the visual art lead, teaches art at Horace Mann Arts and Science Magnet Middle School.

Whether campers spend the day in the desert room or the treehouse room, the first goal is to teach them a few basic chords on a ukulele. According to Spero, once the girls get that taste of success early on, it's a big motivator for the rest of the week, at the end of which they perform their original songs at a concert for friends and family.

Song styles and topics run the gamut from summertime and watermelon-printed swimsuits to the importance of not losing hope in an unjust world. Likewise, the girls' diversity of ages, personalities and circumstances presents a moving target for the Trust Tree team.

"Sometimes girls come back the next year and you see that change in demeanor when they hit junior high," Castellano says. "That age is so hard, especially for girls, so our job is to figure out a way to let them shine and work through it. It's a matter of us giving them the right tools to work through new issues so they can still be themselves and be confident in who they are."

And that, it seems, is the key to Trust Tree: intentionally building an atmosphere of certainty, of silliness, of fearlessness — something the women of DOT remember lacking in those formative years.

"Trust Tree is personal because we've created a space for our younger selves," Wolf says. "It's a space where girls can express themselves and take risks in a safe environment. Performing an original song, creating something personal or sharing experiences can be scary, especially for young people who live in a world where bullying is a constant threat."



Katie Childs Photo

This fall, DOT will release a five-song EP, following the release of their single "Inescapable Things" now on Spotify, iTunes and other streaming platforms. Today, they balk at how it never crossed their teen minds that they could write and perform the music they loved.

Boys were in bands. Girls were fans. The end.

At Trust Tree, they're determined not to let that mindset go unquestioned. One of their core tenants is that "the arts and service to one's community are inextricably connected." It may start with a conversation about girls in bands, but the hope is to instill a spirit of inquisitiveness.

"It's about helping girls occupy a space where we traditionally haven't been as welcomed," Spero says. "If we can help them to feel comfortable doing that, especially at a young age, I hope it can spark a lifelong habit. It's very intentional. We want to help them move into male-dominated spaces and feel comfortable there, because that's a skill we all need as women, no matter what we go on to do in our lives, whether it's music or finance."

That intentionality came into play in April when the team realized an in-person camp wouldn't be happening this summer. Instead they're hosting an at-home camp complete with self-guided projects, meetups over Zoom and provided art supplies and instruments, all for free.

## Say No to Cavities Challenge



In February, National Kids Dental Health Month, we're challenging families and classrooms to brush their teeth twice a day, floss daily and track their progress on a calendar chart.

FEBRUARY 2022 BRUSHING & FLOSSING CHART

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

I got this the dentist during my most recent visit. I got this the dentist during my most recent visit. I got this the dentist during my most recent visit.

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"We're all going through a rough time, especially our black girls who are dealing with a really scary, overwhelming time," Spero says. "We felt it was the perfect time to give back to our little community, and we want these girls to know that art and music and creativity and self-expression can be there for you always, especially in your darkest times."

It's a notion these women practice as much as they preach and go out of their way to share with girls in central Arkansas. Trust Tree is not a money-maker, it's no one's full-time job and isn't tied to any large, well-funded institutions. And yet, the grassroots nonprofit has grown to host three weeks of summer camp, as well as year-round community events, instrument workshops and other family-friendly festivities.

According to Spero, every dollar raised goes back into art supplies, instruments, scholarships (60% of campers receive financial support to make attending possible) and mentorship opportunities with like-minded local artists. In fact, Brie Boyce of Little Rock music duo Dazz & Brie so enjoyed her time as a guest facilitator that she's officially joining the team this summer.



And while monetary donations and Amazon Wishlist purchases are always welcomed, growing the tree of trust goes beyond the streamers and rainbows.

"In this culture, unfortunately, we still place so much importance on girls' outer appearances and how they can be useful to other people," Spero says, "but just taking an interest in the inner world of girls, their thoughts and feelings, is a huge way to support our work."

And people get it. The vision they thought they'd have to explain has been openly welcomed by the community. For the girls, it's second nature. Whether they walk in ready to make friends or need time to open up, they instantly build a community of encouragement, cheering each other on despite carrying burdens that would stoop adult shoulders. Homelessness, domestic violence, drug abuse, the Trust Tree has seen it all, and still inspires smiles on bright, young faces.

Then comes the final performance. Always packed full of emotions, Wolf says the concerts bring a mix of excitement and nerves in girls sharing their work with loved ones and eagerness in families to learn something new about their daughters, sisters and friends.

"It's really special to watch a young girl come out of her shell, bravely share something she has created and feel proud, accepted and supported by her friends and family," Wolf says.

"It's the ultimate warm fuzzy."

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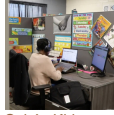


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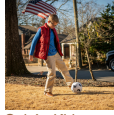
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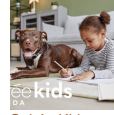
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To capture the style and culture of Little Rock and its people and to be the ultimate guide to the best the city has to offer.

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