

# Making a Difference

How two brothers and their best friend, help build an award-winning music program in Camden public schools

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One of the best music education programs in the nation is emerging from the city of Camden.

Three educators, Jamal Dickerson, 36, a teacher at the Creative and Performing Arts High School, his younger brother Nasir Dickerson, 27, who teaches at Morgan Village Middle school and their best friend, Hassan Sabree, 35, a teacher at R.T. Cream Elementary School, work together to make sure students are prepared for the next step in their music education.

Jamal Dickerson calls it "vertical alignment," an approach that includes teachers collaborating on lesson plans and peers helping peers from elementary to high school. Jamal believes this approach could work in teaching children math, science and other subjects.

The trio's work in Camden schools was recently recognized as the focus of an award winning short documentary produced by Richard Renner and Wanda Swanson for the former New Jersey Network. The public television piece "Classroom Close-Up, NJ: Musical Thread," won the 29th Annual Mid-Atlantic Emmy Awards in Philadelphia



— PHOTO BY VELVET'S MCNEIL/SOUTH JERSEY JOURNAL PHOTOGRAPHER

Nasir Dickerson (left) and his brother Jamal Dickerson are musicians and teachers in the Camden public school system. The Dickerson brothers and their childhood friend, Hassan Sabree teach students at different grade levels from elementary to 12th grade.

in September.

Jamal, Nasir and Hassan, all Black Belts in Karate, were encouraged as young children to study music and learn martial arts as members of the Unity Community Center, a nationally renown performing arts center in Camden, run by Robert Dickerson and his wife, Wanda, the parents of Jamal and Nasir.

All three continued with their music education after

graduating from Camden public schools.

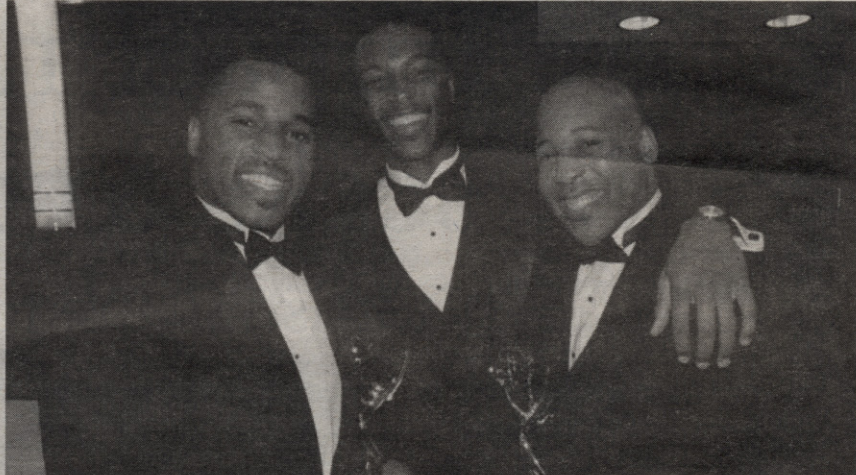
Born in Philadelphia and raised in Camden, Jamal Dickerson started playing trumpet in second grade. By high school he was studying with Leon Mitchell and Terrell Stafford, both professional jazz musicians. He has also worked with jazz trumpeter and playwright Cullen Knight.

Jamal graduated from Mor-

gan State University in 1999, and earned his master's in public administration at Rutgers University in 2010.

In 2007, he received the Milken Family Foundation National Educator Award, which are rewarded to elementary and secondary school teachers, principals and other educators who are furthering excellence in education.

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—PHOTO BY ROBERT H. DICKERSON

**Jamal Dickerson, his brother, Nasir Dickerson and their best friend, Hassan Sabree pose together at the Mid-Atlantic Emmy Awards in Philadelphia. All three men teach music in Camden public schools.**

are good musicians, they enjoy performing.

On this day during practice in the band room there is an initial light hazing of new members. The newcomers have to stand facing the full band, introduce themselves, tell why they joined and then briefly play their instrument. After each introduction and performance, the band applauds the new member and welcomes them into the fold.

Next, all the young musicians march in quick unison from the band room onto the field to practice the routines they will later perform in a few hours at Camden High School's homecoming.

Watching the band practice is Brent White, a professional musician who recently toured with multiple Grammy Awards winner John Legend. For the past seven years, White, a music teacher at Drexel University in Philadelphia, has volunteered to teach trombone to the young musicians because he believes in what his friend Jamal is doing.

"These guys have this feeder system. The kids get to deal with these strong Black males from basically ... the fourth grade all the way to the 12th grade and as long as they stay in the system they have a way of connecting, with the same curriculum, the same program, the same family. It's one of the most powerful programs for African Americans in America.

I wish math teachers and science teachers had this type of community and this type of vision ...," said White.

"In the seven years I've been around Camden I would say they have sent over 150 kids to colleges and to conservatories. I know kids that have gone to Florida A&M University to Oberlin, to Berklee School of Music through this music program.

If you track down all the alumni that have graduated from here you will see a lot of successful results."

White attributes the students' success to caring teachers.

"These guys care. They spend their spare time (with students). They work beyond the hours of what they teach. They sincerely care about community building.

I just believe in what Jamal is doing; I just want to help in any way that I can."

Felicia Greene is also looking on to the field and watching her daughter Jamellia Greene, a 10th grader, practice with the band.

"It's wonderful," said Ms. Greene. "Jamellia has been playing drums since second grade. She said her daughter has been taught music by all three men. She attributes her daughter's success in the band and in the classroom to what Jamellia has learned from her three music mentors.

"She looks up to them. "