

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



MEKHI GLADDEN *Oboe*

Nineteen-year-old Mekhi Gladden is the youngest member of the Aspen Music Festival and School oboe studio. He comes to Aspen from his hometown of Atlanta, Georgia after finishing his first year at the Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia.

He is a first-generation classical musician, but his love of the arts developed from a young age as his parents always encouraged their children to sing, dance, and play music of all kinds in their family home “every day, at all hours of the day,” says Gladden, a sentimental smile spreading across his face.

“My siblings and I would put on performances, sing songs and make up choreography. Thinking back, I guess my love of music started really early.”

Gladden started his instrumental career in the fourth grade as a percussionist. The switch came about two years later as a sixth-grader when his band director put out a call for more oboists.

“I had never heard of an oboe, but I said yes to her because of my fascination with other instruments, and I assumed it looked like a bassoon because that was about the most iconic thing I could imagine at my age. When I received the oboe case, I was startled by the small size. I thought, ‘is this right?’ I tried it anyway and ended up sticking with it!” says Gladden.

As he progressed further in his oboe studies, he began to get involved with local music initiatives, including the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Talent Development Program that works to identify and develop young musically gifted African American and Latino classical music students in preparation for careers as professional musicians. It was a game changing-program for Gladden.

Through it all, his parents continue to be his number one fans and Gladden believes that their support makes it possible for him to work towards his dream of becoming a professional oboist.

“My parents don’t really have a background in classical music, and neither did I when I first got into it, but they’ve been extremely supportive in ways that I can’t even explain. Just the fact that they were willing to spend hundreds of hours driving me to lessons, getting me across the city to play in twenty different ensembles, and taking me to college auditions all over the country, means so much to me.”

“They organized their whole lives so I could have a chance. Without them, it would not have been possible. I’m so thankful that they were completely on board and knew that I could do something amazing. They wanted to give me a chance to explore how far I could go,” says Gladden lovingly.

When asked who his most influential mentor is, Gladden responds, “my dad. Before any performance or audition, he always says, ‘go get ‘em.’ A simple phrase but, to me, it means a million things because it’s confidence, it’s perseverance, it’s mental stability, it’s knowing I have support, it’s being happy in what I’m doing and excited that I’m taking this opportunity.”

This summer, Gladden, a recipient of the Vincent Wilkinson Scholarship, has the opportunity to study with AMFS artist-faculty member Elaine Douvas. “The way she thinks about music is just so unique,” he raves. “The things she has to say are thoughtful, and they bring about this whole sense of self questioning and wondering how I can implement it all in my music as I continue to discover myself as an artist. She’s extremely inspirational and everyone in the studio is extremely supportive!”

In addition to his time with Douvas, Gladden is enjoying his time in Aspen because he finds himself thriving among kindred spirits who love music too. “There’s a community here and concerts at the Benedict Music Tent provide a wholesome feeling, because it’s not in the middle of a big city. You can just be there in the moment, enjoying the music in an open-air personal space. I haven’t been anywhere that is quite as beautiful as Aspen,” he says.

“When I make it as a professional oboist, I want to have a platform to give back to students like myself, because the only reason I’m here is thanks to the people who saw something in me. I feel like I can’t live without doing the same, because everyone deserves music.”

– MEKHI GLADDEN