



# TAKE IT BEYOND THE CONCERT HALL

with From the Top Alum  
Stanford Thompson



Stanford Thompson is the Founder and Director of [Play on Philly](#) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He plays trumpet and performed on *From the Top Show 095* as part of the Atlanta Youth Wind Symphony.

“If you’re a little creative and into sharing music with the community, then you can carve out a really beautiful and rewarding career. I wanted to do something a little different from sitting in the back of an orchestra.”

Stanford Thompson is the founder and director of [Play on Philly](#) (POP): a tuition-free program inspired by El Sistema, Venezuela’s publicly funded classical music education program. Launched in September 2011, POP serves kids ages six to thirteen from all across the city. They receive three hours of musical training every day after school. Students select one string, woodwind, or brass instrument and get to work learning how to play. With general music classes, choir, ensembles, composition, performances in the POP Symphony Orchestra, and more, it’s no wonder these children will receive over 650 hours of instruction this year! They have had a number of inspiring artists join them for performances, including conductor Simon Rattle ([watch the video](#)) and jazz trumpet Wynton Marsalis (check out the [jam session](#)).

**GOALS:** “Our primary goal is to build a foundation for a prosperous and sustainable society in Philadelphia. By making this investment in children to acquire high-level executive functioning skills, they will soon pay back society through a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship.”

## STANFORD’S MUSICAL BACKGROUND:

Born and raised into a musical family, Stanford began playing the trumpet at age 8. He began teaching private lessons in High School, and also took part in a number of outreach activities through the orchestras and wind ensembles he performed with. Stanford received a Bachelor’s of Music from the Curtis Institute of Music in 2009. Upon graduation, he applied for and was accepted to the [Sistema Fellows Program](#) at the New England Conservatory to explore a career in education and arts leadership. Stanford founded a number of ensembles and programs geared towards community outreach over the next several years, leading up to his newest program Play on Philly.

## Q&A WITH STANFORD

**From the Top (FTT):** : What made you interested in expanding your interests beyond performance?

**Stanford:** Halfway through Curtis I started designing education projects. I run a summer camp in Reading, PA, another program in Philadelphia, and I started a new music project in Kenya the summer after I graduated from Curtis. I started teaching in high school. I had some private students. I did a lot of outreach work. I really got in depth when I was in Kenya...I figured out that I had passions for education, working with kids, business, and of course music.

By the time I left (Curtis), I wanted to find a very unique way to put all of these things together. The Abreu Fellows (Fellowship) program at NEC caught my attention...If you're a little creative and into sharing music with the community, then you can carve out a really beautiful and rewarding career. I wanted to do something a little different from sitting in the back of an orchestra.

“...music education is a powerful vehicle for children to master skills that will enable them to acquire valuable tools for cooperative learning, teamwork, academic success and self-esteem.”



**FTT:** How are the kids doing so far?

**Stanford:** The biggest improvement is in their level of focus on what they have to do every single day. They want to get in the classroom earlier. They want to get set up quicker. They don't want to stop playing at the end of the class. They always ask for two more minutes.

We've also seen shifts in their behavior and their attitudes. I had a parent come to me saying that her child doesn't want to watch television or video games anymore – she wants to bring home her viola. They want to be around it more.

**FTT:** What are your hopes for the children involved with the program?

**Stanford:** It's so important for these kids to have a sense of mastering something every day. That's where the social development happens. Where the kids see that at the beginning of the class they can't do it, but at the end they can – even if it's simply playing three notes or holding your bow better or bowing together. We have to make sure that every single day these kids can go home and say, “This is what I learned.”

Every day is rewarding. To watch the kids pull out their instruments and play. To simply watch them play and make these connections. That's the best part. That's why I want to go to the program every day after frustrating meetings and maybe roadblocks. I can go to the program and watch, and it gets me torched up to back out the next morning and have meetings and interviews. That's why I do this. It's for the kids – we make all the decisions around what's best for them.

**WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT PLAY ON PHILLY?**

Check out this video of the POP beginning violin class!

