

PROFILE

Let the music play

McKinney-based conductor talks community connections

Jason Lim is the conductor and artistic director for the McKinney Philharmonic Orchestra. His career has taken him to such locations as Hong Kong, Australia, Poland ... and Denton. On Friday, Lim, representing the McKinney Philharmonic, was announced as the winner of the American Prize in Orchestral Programming/Vytautas Martynaitis Memorial Award professional division for 2021.

WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST MUSIC-RELATED MEMORY?
Although I can't remember one particular memory, I do remember many, and many of them involve my mom being instrumental in doing everything she could to give me and my siblings a wonderful musical training. She wanted to give us a means to make a living as a grown up, but I didn't think she dreamt of any of us reaching the heights that we have. I also remember that my grandfather opposed us having music lessons. Being an old school guy from China, he didn't think being a musician would be a meaningful profession.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN CONDUCTING? WHAT GOT YOU INTO IT?
My mother would get her hands on video tapes from friends and would bring them home to let us watch them. One of the video tapes was the Last Piano Competition in England with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra conducted by Simon Rattle. His gestures were so colorful and were so much fun to watch. I was about 12 then, and since then I secretly wanted to become a conductor. However, I never thought it was possible for me. I wasn't particularly brilliant on the piano back then and neither was I even remotely good on viola. I secretly held on to this "dream" until I made it to music school in Australia. For a while I wanted to be a jazz pianist, then when the opportunity came, I decided to give it a try. I would say that I have been conducting actively for the last nine years. I got my masters in conducting in 2003 but quit because I had a had experience with my college professor and was very disillusioned.

WHAT INSTRUMENT(S) DO YOU PLAY? HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN PLAYING?
My main instrument is the viola but on occasion, play the violin. I've been playing the viola since I was 12.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE PIECE TO CONDUCT?
My favorite piece to conduct is the piece I have not yet conducted. I have enjoyed every piece whether it is

difficult or easy. They all pose a unique challenge, however I always enjoy conducting Copland. The meter, tempo and often style changes make it so much fun to conduct.

YOUR CAREER HAS LED YOU ALL OVER THE WORLD. WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR FAVORITE PLACE TO PERFORM OR CONDUCT AND WHY?

As they say, nothing beats home. Spending time with the McKinney Philharmonic Orchestra is special to me in so many ways. I have built a rapport with the musicians I work with and have spent several years slowly convincing them that finding meaningful ways to connect with our community is vital. When I conduct the McKinney Philharmonic Orchestra, I am working with musicians that I have hand-picked to help me fulfill the mission. In every sense it is "community building" through music and the arts. When I conduct a public performance, we are performing for our city, for our community.

HOW DID THE PANDEMIC IMPACT THE MCKINNEY PHILHARMONIC?

First and foremost, the city of McKinney has strong arts leadership. They supported us first and let us know they will not stop

their financial support. The McKinney Arts Commission, The Community Development Corporation and Visit McKinney put their trust in us to continue giving arts to our city and we took it upon ourselves to succeed. The challenge was venues closing and for the most part of the 2020-2021 season, we had to take a wait and see approach on when they will reopen. We had to change our concert season dates several times. Another supporter is our Mayor and first lady, George Fuller and Maylee Thomas who did everything she could to help raise funds for musicians in McKinney. Another individual who has continued to support us is Annie Royer who is really the cornerstone of what the Arts in McKinney is today.

WHO PERFORMS IN THE MCKINNEY PHILHARMONIC?

The McKinney Philharmonic Orchestra is unlike any orchestra in the North Texas region. We have a specific mission statement that is geared towards "community." When I formed this orchestra in 2012, I wanted to bring together a special kind of musician that not only plays well and is well versed in their respective instrument but to bring together musicians that they believe in "service to community." Most musicians are not trained that way in music school and have very little interest in that, but over the last few years, we have been so blessed to find many musicians like that, that believe in our mission and have been integral in helping us build our organization, engaging on our vision, helping mentor our youth orchestra and bringing all kinds of music to our community. They are the ones that make the world go round. We have a youth orchestra (The Greater North Texas Youth Orchestra) which is also based in McKinney. Our musicians have many students that play in the youth orchestra and their students follow them because of the type of relationship they have with their students goes beyond just music lessons. They are not just their music teachers, but they are their mentors and treat their students like their own kids. Granted, we do have very good performers in our orchestra, from graduate music students to orchestra and band directors in the local school districts as well as seasoned musicians that have been in the business for many years. Currently we have a handful of musicians in leadership roles that are leading the charge in pursuing our vision.



Natalie Reid Knutson and Kjell Knutson

COURTESY OF BRUCE LATIMER

A haven of hope

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Walk inside a 100-year-old farmhouse in Old Town Lewisville and one thing you'll notice are the hardwood floors. It's hard to tell at first glance, but some of the panels are new while some are as old as the house itself. That was intentional. It speaks to the mission of Broken Halos Haven, a charity recently created by Flower Mound couple Kjell Knutson and Natalie Reid Knutson. "The house is a blending of the new and a reverence for the past," Kjell said. Kjell and Natalie purchased the 1,500-square-foot home, located at the intersection of College and Charles streets, in 2020 and are turning it into the centerpiece for Broken Halos Haven. The program is a "grief getaway" for young widows and their children who need to regroup after experiencing what's likely the worst loss of their lives. Natalie knows that loss all too well. In August of 2018 her husband Wayne died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of 47. She was left to raise three boys — Joshua, Austin and Brody — by herself while figuring out how to find happiness again. Natalie recalls a trip to New York she and her sons took on the Christmas Eve after

Wayne died. Her friend planned everything, and Natalie said the trip was just what she and her sons needed. That sparked the idea for Broken Halos Haven. "We got to get away from the house and all the triggers that were there and had fun things to do," Natalie said. "But I didn't have to plan anything." With help from her friends and a strong faith she soon found happiness with Kjell, and two years later the couple got married. Around that time they bought the house in hopes of providing an escape for widows who have gone through the same thing. "We want to help widows find joy again in life," Kjell said. "And hopefully in this dwelling that we create they can get out of the space and let God do the work." **BROKEN HALOS HAVEN** Young widows can register for Broken Halos Haven and once approved will receive a two-day stay at the house, at no charge to them. Natalie, Kjell and many volunteers are rebuilding the three-bedroom, two-bathroom house to make it new all the way around — new floors, walls, fixtures, fresh paint, updated appliances, bunk beds for the children, an inspirational mural and plenty of lighting. An

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