

Labor of Love

When Grammy Award winner Paquito D'Rivera stepped to the stage of the State Theater to play his saxophone with young jazz musicians, no one felt more satisfaction than Rutgers senior maintenance mechanic Leslie Ford.

The moment represented yet another milestone for Ford, who, in 1989 with funds from his own pocket, founded the nonprofit Jazz Institute of New Jersey to give free music lessons to underprivileged kids. Since then, the institute has taught hundreds of kids ages 8 to 18 about concepts common to

jazz: creativity, teamwork, discipline, tradition.

The institute now includes about 25 volunteers who provide instruction and administrative support for the institute's 135 students, an artist-in-residence program, and a 20-member youth ensemble that performs about 25 gigs a year. Funds to purchase and



“The power of music changed my life. Why not change others with it?”



lease instruments come from corporations, arts council grants, and individuals.

Ford, a former professional jazz trumpeter and an assistant music director of off-Broadway musicals, has watched alumni go on to play with the Duke Ellington Orchestra and Herbie Hancock. He says that the institute provided the opportunity

to give students what music gave to him—the discipline and self-esteem to steer his life

beyond the projects of Newark. “I took all that was negative that was taught in the ghetto and put it into something positive,” says Ford, who is busy this summer working on plans to open a satellite institute in Elizabeth in the fall.

Photograph by Bill Ballenberg