

## GJILBERTA LUCAJ – ALLEN STEVENSON SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW



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**Our next ASpotlight Interview is with Cello Teacher Gjilberta Lucaj! Read below to learn more about what inspired Ms. Lucaj to bring her love for cello into the classroom, her teaching philosophy, how she thinks instrumental music education adds to our boys' comprehensive education, and how she has successfully connected with her students on Zoom as she continues to give lessons remotely during the pandemic.**

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### **Why did you choose to play the cello?**

I started playing the cello at the age of five. I didn't choose the cello first – I started off playing the piano. I soon switched to the cello because in Albania, where I was born, having a piano in your home was rare. So, I chose the cello because it was portable, and I could practice at home. I was enamored by its beautiful, deep, mellow sound. Plus, there weren't that many girls playing the cello at that time.

My mother was a musician herself and very adamant about me practicing hard every day. To be honest, I really didn't like practicing at all. But I seemed to have a natural talent for it and carried on playing.

When I was 13, I won a competition in Albania and traveled to Italy to perform for the Pope. During that trip to Italy, I really gained an appreciation for how much all music, including my own music, is appreciated by other people and how it can be such a beautiful way to bring communities together.

It was the most amazing affirmation for me that working hard at an instrument pays off. It was such a tangible reward for all my hard work. Winning that competition is what made me think I wanted to make this instrument a large part of my life's work.

### **Why did you decide to bring your love for cello into the classroom as an instrumental instructor?**

I have always loved teaching. It comes naturally to me. I continue to learn about my own cello playing through my students.

The school I attended as a young student in Albania used a method for teaching music that was very methodical and very strict. It consisted of hundreds of boring technical exercises. It was kind of like doing push-ups all day long. It's not that I didn't learn – I did – but it did nothing to inspire a love of music in me. My teachers were very stern, very serious, and very scary.

I was fortunate, though, and caught on to things quickly. So, my teachers started asking me to teach certain exercises to my fellow classmates. That is where I found a passion for teaching. Through helping them, I helped myself. I felt like I was doing something positive, and it helped me improve my own playing. My classmates all had their own unique style from which I could learn.

### **How long have you been teaching at A-S?**

Ten glorious years! I started with 7 students, and this year I recruited 23 more cello players. Throughout these years I have taught at least 350 students. For the first time in Allen Stevenson's history, we had to hire another cello teacher!

### **How do you impart a love of music to your students in response to the more serious, rigid instruction that you received at their age?**

I want my students to love to play the cello, without the need for perfection. I believe that if you instill a love for the instrument in students, they will never forget it. Even if they don't continue to play the cello into adulthood, they will never forget that experience and it will bring back happy positive memories. Realistically, most of my students will not become professional cello players. That is not the goal of my instruction. I want to give them the chance to explore instrumental music and find out how it can benefit their unique selves.

When I was in school, I never played fun music and I never was able to choose the music I played. I was given a book of exercises and told to learn them and that was that. I try to push away from that and instead give my students as much choice as possible in the music they play so that they are truly interested in playing the music in front of them. I provide guidance, of course, by choosing options for their skill level. I give them a selection of age-appropriate pieces and let them choose one they want to study. By letting them choose, I am allowing them to be part of their own education, direct their path and make autonomous decisions.

Importantly, I never talk down to my students. I treat them with respect. When you are actively present and caringly communicate with them, they listen to you and reciprocate that respect. They feel appreciated and

they feel seen as a whole person. I obviously set boundaries and expectations, but I want them to have a responsibility in their own learning, take charge, and have fun.

One of the great things about Allen-Stevenson is that music is seen as just as important as math, science or any other academic subject. Allen-Stevenson embraces the fact that music education is about so much more than just playing an instrument.

**What value do you think instrumental music education adds to our boys' comprehensive education at A-S?**

Music has so much value in our boys' education. It is a way for students to become socially and emotionally competent, and teaches them how to be focused, learn, problem-solve, pay attention to detail and so much more. Music is such a holistic subject. Studying music is truly learning a whole new language.

We also talk a lot about professionalism and appearance when performing, such as how to dress for a performance, how to bow, and strategies to handle nerves if you have a hard time performing in front of audiences. Speaking or performing in front of others is hard. Public speaking is said to be one of the greatest fears for people in the world. I try to encourage my students to perform and help them feel comfortable being in front of an audience. These skills translate well into their academic classes, when they do debates starting in the Third Grade.

Multiple studies have shown that neural networks from both sides of the brain become more active as one learns to play an instrument. Other studies show that when musicians play together for a long time, they can communicate with each other non-verbally more efficiently. Pretty awesome right?

I think it's incredible that no two students ever play a piece the same way. It's a testament to the wonderful individuality that is involved in music. You can see their personality in every performance.

**Do you have any special memories or stories about an experience you had with a student that stuck with you?**

Honestly, every day is so special in my studio. I am amazed by each and every boy and the way he overcomes difficulties. Every lesson is meaningful, because they're present and always do their best and we have a lot of laughs along the way.

This year was amazing. Two of my boys, Alexander Diefenbach and Spencer Mitchell, won first and third place respectively in a statewide cello competition among hundreds of applicants. Another student, James Zwirn, was the only Middle Schooler to be accepted into the highly regarded ISO Symphony of the InterSchool Orchestras of New York.

The experience I had winning a competition and traveling to Italy to play for the Pope when I was about their age had such a lasting impact on me, and it so special for me to be able to watch my own students have similar experiences and accomplishments and reach those same milestones.

**How would you describe your experience using Zoom to stay connected with students and continue to give lessons remotely during the pandemic?**

In the beginning, I was a bit nervous learning Zoom and all of its features, but after a couple of weeks I found it efficient and easy. Once I adjusted, I absolutely loved it.

Teaching via Zoom actually lets you be even more focused on the student. I cannot talk too much or move around the room. It keeps the focus one on one and makes you engage with the student. I am so mindful of how and what I am communicating. It really has worked phenomenally for me and for other teachers at Allen-Stevenson.

I find my students are very attentive over Zoom too. They really pay attention to where my fingers are placed, where my bow is going, and the instructions I am giving them. It makes them focus a lot more.

I have continued lessons over Zoom this summer. Of my studio, about 24 students signed up for summer lessons. We have had a blast learning fun pop music and movie themes like The Avengers, Superman, Harry Potter, and more.

**What have you been doing besides teaching remote lessons this summer?**

Zoom has made it possible for me to give live online music performances and I am actually a judge for the New York Independent Film Festival online, which has been so fun. It has been exciting to feel part of that. I'm also working on recording film music with some friends in LA for a film soundtrack.

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