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## River Oaks Chamber Orchestra's founder honored with Gutsy Gal Award

by Kim James



Alecia Lawyer

McParland, a fellow church member. She says, "Alecia has created an artistic jewel for Houston."

Lawyer's idea was to create an experience that would satisfy a multigenerational audience. Concerts are held at five p.m., leaving plenty of time to make dinner reservations afterwards. While parents listen to music played by great musicians from around the nation, kids get music education through the "ROCO-rooters" program.

Lawyer, a Julliard graduate, said everything came together in God's timing. Since its beginning in 2005, she has gathered a board of directors, located top musicians and conductors from around the nation, established an office and hired a staff, established an intern position for Rice University Shepherd School of Music students and gathered donor support.

ROCO was founded to show people the joy in music. The goal, she says, is for there to be a heart-to-heart connection between the musician and the listener. She wanted to create an environment where musicians could push past being worried about how they're playing, and instead, connect with people.

A ROCO concert is an interactive experience, not just a presentation of music from a

group of musicians to an audience. Seats in the orchestra are raffled off to several audience members, so that they can peek inside the musician's world. Musicians also share gig stories or various experiences from their musical careers with the audience. The entire orchestra mingles with the audience during intermission.

Many patrons are impressed with the childcare offered during concerts. Music education — involving instrumental demonstration, music play and videos — is provided for children up to age 10. Because children can remain in childcare until 9:30 p.m., parents can go out for dinner after the concert.

Lawyer has also begun several initiatives to make the concert experience as unintimidating as possible.

"It shames me that our field — classical music — makes people uncomfortable," she says.

The house lights are left up during the performance, so that patrons can follow along in the program during the concert. Pronunciation guides are printed under the composers' names. Lawyer emphasizes that music is a language, and people shouldn't be frightened of it simply because they have no knowledge of it.

Response from audience members and musicians shows

that Lawyer and ROCO are fulfilling their mission. One patron said she found the relational aspect that is missing from other cultural experiences to be present in the joy and playfulness of a ROCO concert.

St. John the Divine Church, ROCO's concert hall, is consistently filled to near-capacity during concert season.

Guest conductors come to ROCO from all over the world. A recent conductor, Edwin Outwater, music director of the Kitchener-Waterloo Symphony Orchestra in Ontario, Canada said, "They've taken a classical concert and made it into a friendly, fun, social event without compromising the music."

November 2007 will be the beginning of ROCO's third concert season.

Family is a large part of her life, and Lawyer says she is most proud of that. One of her favorite memories is of riding in the car listening to the CD of her orchestra when her son said, "Mommy, that's your orchestra!"

Lawyer said she is grateful for the people who stood behind her and encouraged her in this effort.

"When you give of yourself, people return it," she says. "It's really about a give and take of talents and sharing what people love in the community."

**A**lecia Lawyer, the founder of the River Oaks Chamber Orchestra (ROCO), has used her musician's training to create a unique and innovative family-friendly musical experience.

Lawyer is the recipient of *Houston Woman Magazine's* Gutsy Gal Award for taking a leadership position on an idea or project, influencing others to the betterment of the community and serving as an excellent role

1 to others.

was nominated by Sarah