

2013 Medals - Delta

Speaker: Narrator, Shelley Ritter, Travis Calvin

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>> NARRATOR: The National Medal for Museum and Library Services is the nation's highest honor for libraries and museums that are serving their communities in exceptional ways. Delta Blues Museum Executive Director Shelley Ritter and community member Travis Calvin traveled to Washington from Clarksdale, Mississippi to receive the National Medal and spoke to IMLS about how the museum impacts the community.

>> SHELLEY RITTER: Well, the Delta Blues Museum is Mississippi's oldest music museum. We were founded in 1979 as part of the Carnegie Public Library. And our mission is really to honor the artists from the Delta and their musical contributions to really global music. Most of them all came from Clarksdale.

The Delta Blues Museum serves really two distinct communities. We serve our local community and then we serve the global blues community because we have a really strong international visitorship from people who are in Europe and they know the blues maybe through the Rolling Stones, maybe through the Beatles, and then they trace it back to John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Son House, Robert Johnson, and they come to Clarksdale on a musical pilgrimage of sorts to really find the roots. That's what our museum is about.

The arts and education program is an afternoon program offered at the Delta Blues Museum four days a week. The museum owns all the instruments, guitars, keyboards, drums, bass, and we employ local blues musicians to teach the classes and you learn to play music by playing music.

>> TRAVIS CALVIN: I started at the museum at the age of eight with my twin brother and older sisters. It was our turn to instead of being outside in a rough neighborhood. There was lots of gang violence, drug and alcohol abuse in my neighborhood, so my parents wanted me to do something constructive with my time.

My brother played drums and later bass guitar. This is my twin brother. My middle brother played piano. My twin sisters, they both sang. We had a little band, we were called Blues Prodigy, with a few more other students inside the program. We actually won the first Blues Kids Handy Award.

>> SHELLEY RITTER: Although a lot of art has come from our community, it's not really an easily accessible, thriving part of our community except at the museum. So we bring things in, we teach students how to sing and play blues, and then the Delta Blues Museum band will perform at local festivals. We've performed at the Chicago Blues Festival and they even performed at the White House a few years ago.

>> TRAVIS CALVIN: I began assisting teaching when I was about tenth grade. My job was to mainly assist the head instructors. I would go around and help and make sure everyone was actually learning.

>> SHELLEY RITTER: Travis was, believe it or not, kind of shy; very talented but very almost introverted to a degree. We employed him as a teacher in the classroom and we started seeing him blossom a little bit more. He moved on. The next thing I know Trent and Travis are co-valedictorians at the community college.

>> TRAVIS CALVIN: After high school and after the Delta Blues Museum, I decided to pursue a career in music, in the music industry. I just graduated from Delta State University with a Bachelor of Science in Music Industry Studies, with a concentration in audio engineering and music business. I have no idea where I'd be without the museum; probably just another statistic, just one of my neighborhood bums or something like that, just sitting around and doing nothing with my life, playing video games.

>> SHELLEY RITTER: Travis is a stellar example of what the program can be. We hope that through Travis' success that we can connect and reach an even broader audience as we bring up students and foster these talents and they take them to other levels beyond the museum.

I think it's important to pass on the story of the Delta Blues because it is such an indigenous art form and just what these early musicians who really had nothing but yet they still had this incredible talent that they managed to nurture and foster and celebrate. And just being able to know that you can

take nothing and build a career out of it that people enjoy and that has influenced people all over the world is really incredible. We need to step back and look at that and admire that and not focus on what we don't have but look at what we do have. I think music and the arts really that's what they're about.