City Owls



In the heart of New Haven, two Southern graduates are lifting up their community through separate organizations — both dedicated to the greater good.

By Natalie Missakian

During the worst days of his childhood, ADAM CHRISTOFERSON, '10, turned to music as both his anchor and escape hatch.

As a kid, he recalls living with his mom, who had schizophrenia, in a rent-subsidized apartment on Rock Street in New Haven, on the edge of one of the city's roughest neighborhoods. His father, a Vietnam veteran, struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder.

When his mother's illness progressed, Christoferson spent time in foster care and eventually moved in with his grandmother.

Music became a lifeline. Coming from a musical family — his uncle is New Haven-born singer-songwriter Michael Bolton — Christoferson learned to play drums as an 8 year old and later took up several other instruments.

"It was my expression. It was the way I communicated in the world," says Christoferson, now 34. "When there was absolute chaos all around, music kept me together and kept me healthy. It kept me, *me*."

ERIK CLEMONS, '04, grew up poor in Norwalk, Conn. By the time he was a teenager, his father had disappeared and his family moved to Stamford, where he shared a cramped, one-room apartment with his mother and three siblings.

In the next few years, the family moved a lot. Clemons bounced from school to school — a different one for each year of high school — and the instability was reflected in his grades.

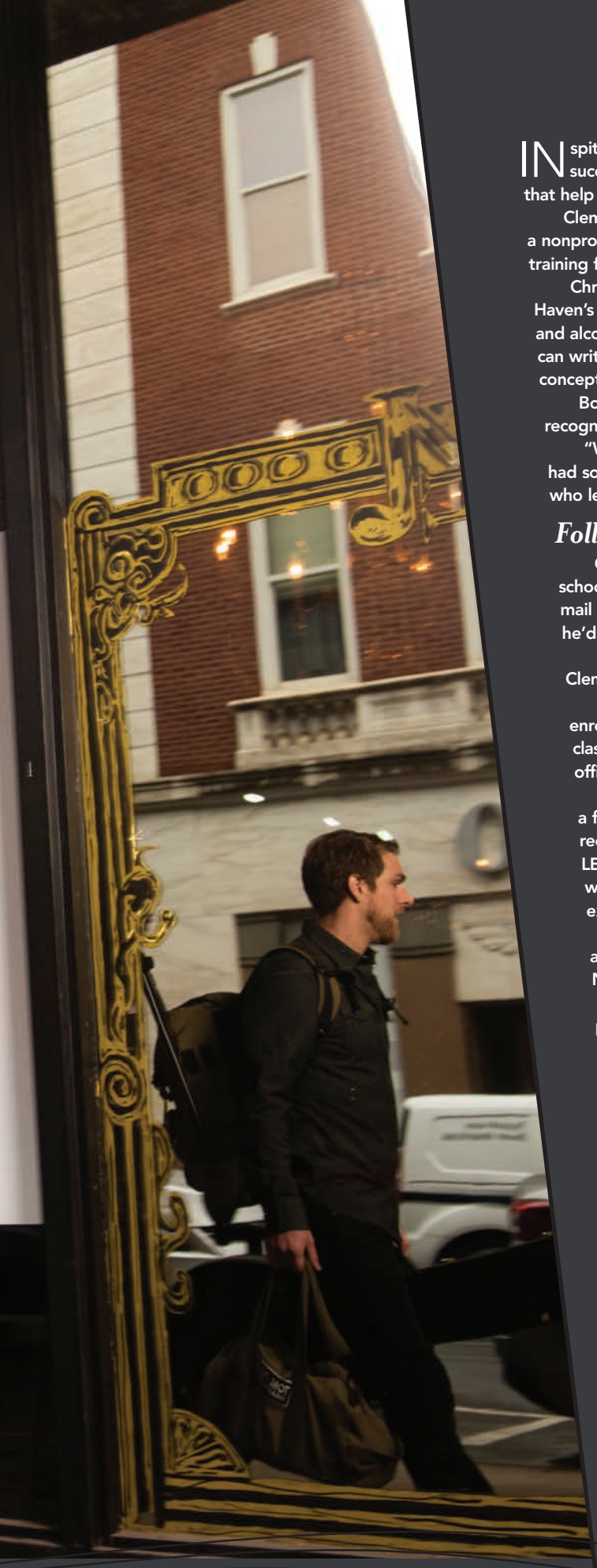
"I wanted my life to contribute to something greater than a job."

— Erik Clemons, '04, CEO and president of ConnCAT





Once labeled a "difficult" high school student, Adam Christoferson, '10, now uses his talent to help others through Musical Intervention, the New Haven–based nonprofit organization he founded.



In spite of those experiences, both men persevered. Today they are each successful social justice entrepreneurs in the Elm City, running organizations that help people, including many facing extremely difficult life challenges.

Clemons, 52, helms the Connecticut Center for Arts and Technology (ConnCAT), a nonprofit that provides after-school arts programming for at-risk youth and job training for unemployed and underemployed adults in the health and culinary fields.

Christoferson, meanwhile, shares the therapeutic power of music with New Haven's homeless and recovery population through Musical Intervention, a drug- and alcohol-free space in a downtown storefront on Temple Street, where people can write, record, and perform their own music. He is now working to expand the concept nationally.

Both men say Southern played a big role in their success, citing mentors who recognized their potential and steered them toward life-changing internships.

"What happened to me at Southern is that I found out I had some ability. I had some competence," says Clemons. "There were just some incredible people who left an indelible mark on me."

Following the call

Clemons says his upbringing left him ill-prepared for college, so after high school, he worked various jobs to support himself before landing a position as a mail sorter at the U.S. Postal Service in Stamford. Married and raising four girls, he'd stay there for 16 years, but always had bigger dreams.

"I wanted my life to contribute to something greater than a job," says Clemons.

After 12 years at the post office, he decided to follow his calling. He enrolled at Southern as a full-time sociology major, driving to New Haven for classes after work and returning home at night so he could be back at the post office for his 6 a.m. shift.

Knowing his desire to work with young people of color, Shirley Jackson, a former Southern sociology professor who was also Clemons' adviser, recommended him for an internship at the youth-development organization LEAP (Leadership, Education, and Athletics in Partnership) — where he would eventually rise to become a board member and then Connecticut executive director.

In 2009, his work at LEAP caught the attention of Carlton Highsmith, a retired New Haven businessman who was trying to replicate an acclaimed New Hampshire job training program in the Elm City.

Highsmith asked Clemons if he would help him build and run the program. Clemons said yes, and in 2011, he became ConnCAT's founding chief executive officer.

The nonprofit began with the after-school program and adult courses in phlebotomy and medical billing and coding, and has since added a culinary program, a student-run restaurant, and a high school entrepreneurship camp. Southern hosted the camp in July. In January, ConnCAT scored a $1 million grant from KeyBank to further grow the program.

Asked about his favorite success story, Clemons points to two of his adult students, one in phlebotomy and another in medical billing and coding, who now are teachers in the program.

"It's not just about job training. It's about how can we get people to see that there are possibilities beyond the conditions they see. That's kind of the story of my life as well," he says.

"I never thought about being a CEO or founding CEO of anything," adds Clemons. "I was able to do some really amazing things because people noticed me. That's it."

'He gave me a shot'

On paper, Christoferson says he didn't appear to be "college material" either. Branded a "difficult student" and channeled into special education, he knew his GPA and test scores wouldn't get him into Southern.

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So he pleaded his case to Richard Farricielli, then the interim vice president for student and university affairs. Christoferson told him about a teen center he was trying to launch in East Haven and how he wanted to one day do something that would "change the world."

"He gave me a shot," recalls Christoferson, who was granted conditional admission.

Once on campus Christoferson immersed himself in student life, becoming a resident adviser, joining student government, and starting an Ultimate Frisbee team. But a few years in, he lost his way. He took time off to live in Hawaii. He fell into depression.

"I was reading Deepak Chopra and trying to get my life together. I really didn't know what my path was," he says.

Eventually he returned to Southern, still unsure about his future, until he accidentally stumbled on a link for information on recreation and leisure studies while registering for classes. (Today, it's the Department of Recreation, Tourism, and Sport Management.)

"I just clicked on it and it opened up all these key courses that were, basically, what I'm all about," he says. He decided to pursue recreation therapy and began to excel academically.

His adviser, James MacGregor, now chair of the department, set him up with an internship at Yale New Haven Children's Psychiatric Inpatient Service unit, where he was later hired as a recreation therapist, a job that sowed the seeds for Musical Intervention. His first week there, Christoferson noticed a girl drawing a picture of someone singing.

"I asked her if she wanted to make music with me," he recalls. His supervisor gave him permission to bring some recording equipment onto the unit.

"And it was a hit," Christoferson says. "This girl completely transformed, being able to make music and record it."

His work was later featured in the World Congress of the International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and Christoferson would be invited to speak at international symposiums.

In 2015, he won a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to work with the homeless population. The following year he opened Musical Intervention, where he continues to see miraculous transformations through music.

"There are people who have been homeless for such a long time, they haven't had a guitar to play. That's what we provide. There are people who are in crisis with drugs or mental illness and they let [music] go years ago and missed it," Christoferson says. "While they're in treatment, they're able to come to us and regain all of that passion and creativity that was lost." ■

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and says he was somewhat overwhelmed to receive the acceptance letter and learn he'd received a full Presidential Merit Scholarship. "We were immediately celebrating. That was one of the best days of my life," he says.

FINDING THE PERFECT MATCH

There are 180 students in the Honors College, including those who applied to the program after their first-year or as transfer students. (The latter groups do not receive scholarships.)

Honors College students are a talented group: the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores of last year's entering class averaged 1250. (The 2018 application suggested a minimum combined SAT score of approximately 1080, or the ACT equivalent.) That said, admissions is based on far more than test scores, including letters of recommendation; a review of past leadership and community service; and several essays.

"I can tell you that 100 percent of our students are involved in leadership or community service in high school," says Gemme.

Finalists are invited to an Honors College Essay Day to learn more about the program, complete a writing prompt, and join an Honors College-style class. The review process is rigorous and time-consuming, particularly in comparison to some colleges that rely solely on standardized test scores. "We only have 40 spots per year — and not only do we want the 40 best students, but we want the 40 students who we think will be most successful and thrive in the program," says Gemme.

Interest in the Honors College has grown significantly, fueled, in part, by rising tuition costs at private colleges and the comparatively low cost of attending Southern. In recent years, the New York Times, U.S. News, USA Today, the Washington Post, and countless others have lauded the benefits of honors programs offered at state universities. At Southern, there were more than 200 applicants for the Honors College's 40 spots for first-year students in 2017 — an increase of more than 122 percent from four years prior.

"The Honors College now attracts students from across the country – which it didn't do initially," says Smith.

Regardless of where students hail from, once at Southern, the Honors College is home. Building that sense of community, in recent years, about 74 percent of students opted to live with peers in the on-campus Honors College Living and Learning Community, located in West Residence Campus Hall.

Kara Jones chose that option her first and sophomore years — and continued to live with three Honors College students when she moved as an upper-classman. "We built lifelong friendships. . . . We worked on group assignments and helped each other edit papers. Some of the Honors College classes are very challenging, so it was good for morale to live together," says Jones.

Students also often gather at the Honors College Library, which in March 2010 was dedicated in memory of Daniel Ort, professor emeritus of English and the Honors College co-founder. (The program began in 1982 and was initially the brainchild of Ort; Martin Anisman, then dean of the School of Arts and Sciences; and Kenneth Gatzke, professor of philosophy, according to Smith, who became the program's first director.)

Looking forward, the program's recent changes — including the aforementioned adoption of the new minor, enhanced capstone options, an increased focus on community outreach, and scholarship dollars for all — offer expanded opportunities for future scholars.

Yet, challenges remain. Gemme notes that based on interest, the Honors College could easily double in size while still keeping its small community feel. But additional funding is needed to provide more merit scholarships. "There are so many students who we think would be great in the program that we just don't have the scholarships to support," says Gemme.

In the meantime, she is committed to making the experience as rich as possible for today's Honors College students. She concedes that at least initially some of these "star students" do not see themselves as Southern candidates. "Not all of them choose to go here," she says. "But many, once they see what we are and what we do, realize Southern is exactly what they want. . . . They find it's like being in a liberal arts college with peers who are as excited about learning as they are. And they also have all the resources of a large university — the football team, the campus-wide service learning opportunities, the theater, student government, clubs, and student life. It's the best of both worlds." ■