

2013 National Medal Winner Video: Delta Blues Museum

Narration: 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 Shelly 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.

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Shelly 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 artist from the Delta, and their musical contributions to really global music. // -- most of them all came from Clarksdale.

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Shelly Ritter: 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 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, and that's what our museum is about.

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Shelly Ritter: The Arts and Education Program is an afternoon program offered at the Delta Blue Museum four days a week. // The Museum owns all the instruments, guitars, keyboards, drums, base. // And we employ local blues musicians to teach the classes. //

And you learn to play music by playing music.

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Travis Calvin: I started at the museum at the age of eight with my twin brother and older sisters.

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Travis Calvin: It was an alternative 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.

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Travis Calvin: My brother played drums and, later, bass guitar. This is my twin brother. My middle brother played piano. My twin sisters, they both sang.

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Travis Calvin: 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 Awards,

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Shelly Ritter: Although a lot of arts has come from our community, it's not really a thriving, or 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 and we performed at the Chicago Blues Festival, and they even performed at the White House a few years ago.

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Travis Calvin: I began assistant teaching when I was in about tenth grade.

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Travis Calvin: My job was mainly to assist the head instructors. // I would go around and help and make sure everyone was actually learning.

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Shelly Ritter: Travis was, believe it or not, kind of shy. Very talented, but very almost introverted to a degree. And we employed him as a teacher in the classroom and we started seeing him blossom a little bit more, and he moved on. Then the next thing I know Trent and Travis are co-valedictorians at the Community College.

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Travis Calvin: After high school and after the Delta Blues Museum, I decided to pursue a career in music. Well, 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.

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Travis Calvin: I have no idea where I would be without the museum. Probably just another statistic. Just one of my neighborhood bums or something like that. Just sitting around, doing nothing with my life. Playing video games.

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Shelly Ritter: Travis is a stellar example of what the program can be.

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Shelly Ritter: We hope that through Travis' success 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.

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Shelly Ritter: 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 it's 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

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incredible. And 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. And I think music and the arts really, that's what they're about.