



PHOTOS BY JOE FUDGE/DAILY PRESS

The Elliott Family String Quartet of Newport News is, from left, Brendon, 14, violin; Justine, 12, violin; Dannielle, 41, viola; and Sterling, 9, cello. Mom Dannielle and her kids have been playing as a quartet since 2004.

Family quartet has the strings that bind

Dannielle Elliott is instrumental in her three children's efforts.

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Practice might not always make you perfect, but it can get you really close.

For the Elliott Family String Quartet, the dedication to practice has caused some people to describe the family's youngest musicians — ages 9, 12 and 14 — as prodigies.

"People say that sometimes," said violinist Brendon, 14. His sister, 12-year-old Justine — a fellow violinist — said that if they sounded so natural, "it's because we practice so much. Anyone can be as good as us. Hard work pays off. It's just normal."

But there's a bit of music in the blood, so to speak: Their mother, Dannielle, 41, said she's been playing violin since she was 8. "First I hated it, then tried again and kept at it," she said.

A few decades later with a family of her own, she wanted the children — including now-cello Sterling, 9 — to learn to play violin.

Two years ago, Dannielle took up viola because traditionally, string quartets are made up of that instrument, two violins and a cello. This gives the group that quartet sound.

Brendon, who's been playing violin since 3, said — with just a little bit of eye rolling — he started because "my mom kind of made me." Thankfully, like her, he's grown to appreciate it.



Dannielle teaches her children — as well as several other students — with the Suzuki method, developed in the mid-20th century: "Kids play by ear first and later learn to read music."

Justine remembers starting off at a young age: "I saw Brendon perform and wanted to play so badly. Plus, I knew mom would make me."

Although the three kids have experimented with different instruments, Dannielle said, "it's best to be proficient" in what they play. "It'll be easier later in life" if they take up another.

Garth, the father, is the willing captive audience — but not a performer.

"We tried to teach him," Justine said. The children's song "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star," was as far as he got. "He refused to practice."

Sterling said he practiced about two hours a day, and he and his siblings each will practice up to three hours a day in the summer.

Not surprisingly, their mother teaches her children — as well as several other students — with the Suzuki method, developed in the mid-20th century by Shinichi Suzuki.

"Kids play by ear first and later learn to read music," Dannielle said. "It's modeled by how we speak first, based on others, then learn to read and write."

Of the four, Brendon is most likely to go on with a music career, particularly for solo violin.

Online  extra

To learn more about the Elliott Family String Quartet, visit the Web site www.elliottfamilyquartet.com

He said he would like to be "the first real well-known African-American violinist."

Justine has expressed an interest in marine biology. Sterling chimed in about being a race car driver.

"I never intended to make them professional musicians, but it's something to enrich their lives," Dannielle said. "Playing is also stress relief and lots of fun."

Throughout the year, the members perform solos and together in recitals and competitions. They've been playing as a quartet since 2004.

Justine remembered her first professional contest: "The suspense was kind of nerve-racking but fun as well."

Brendon recently won honors in a concerto competition with a symphony in Richmond, and that wasn't his first recognition. Last spring, for example, he appeared on the national radio program "From the Top," which showcases young musicians. His mother took a call this month from a producer of the same company, which wants Brendon for the televised edition this spring.