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Know Your Neighbor: Lidia Usami

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Lidia Usami is more than an economist, speechwriter, publicist, translator, pianist, piano teacher, and fluent in five languages -- she is also the founder of the [Kids4Kids](#) charitable program in Princeton. "Music needs to be played to uplift people's spirits,"

says Lidia, "and to do something for the community."

A resident of Princeton for seven years, Lidia's idea for the [Kids4Kids](#) program came about four years ago, after [Cyclone Nargis](#) devastated Burma. Two of her piano students have a mother from Burma and approached Lidia about doing a charitable project. They put their heads together and the result was the music-based charitable program called [Kids4Kids](#).

Initially [Kids4Kids](#) focused on Lidia's piano students, who by participating in the program earned donations for practice hours from family members and friends. Sponsors were happy to encourage a child's piano practice as well as contribute to a worthy cause, but Lidia soon realized that their efforts deserved a larger audience. Thanks to Patrick Caddeau, Director of Studies at Forbes College, Forbes Hall became the venue for the first [Kids4Kids](#) benefit concert and has continued there ever since.

Each year [Kids4Kids](#) adopts a different cause. After Cyclone Nargis, the second year was for Pennies for Peace to support schools in Pakistan, and the third (and most recent) concert on May 21, 2011 was a benefit concert for

pan. The funds raised by Kids4Kids this year were sent to the Red Cross and earmarked for the Tohoku International School.

This year, for the first time, Lidia and Pat decided to invite siblings and Princeton University students to play in the concert as well. The Princeton University students loved performing with the children, chatting with them about their own experiences learning an instrument.

All the ideas and pieces chosen for the concerts come from the kids, Lidia says. Children make the posters and choose the program. When children can recognize Burma on a map, and know there was an earthquake in Japan, the Kids4Kids experience enables them to connect more fully to these remote world events. Music should be a vehicle to engage with the world at large, Lidia says, not an end in itself.

Another project initiated at Princeton University and taken up by Lidia's students was the origami Million Cranes Project. Each folded crane raised \$2, with a goal of a million cranes. The cranes were displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the Smithsonian National Natural History Museum in Washington, DC. Lidia's students came to her house on her birthday and learned how to fold cranes. Within two hours, her students folded 646 cranes. Two huge strands of origami cranes were displayed by the piano in Forbes Hall during the Kids4Kids concert.

Lidia would love to take Kids4Kids nationwide, incorporate in Delaware and make the program officially non-profit. In the four years since she has been running Kids4Kids, they have raised more than \$20,000 for charitable causes. "Princeton kids," Lidia says, "are not aware of what it's like not to have anything." She made sure her students understood that before the earthquake, Japanese children in the region were playing Wii and Pokemon and living lives just like theirs. The tsumani hit, she told them, and now they are living in shelters with nothing.

Lidia has played piano from early childhood in Brazil. From Brazil she went to two years of high school in Tokyo and received her B.A. in Economics at the University of Tokyo. She also has a master's degree in International Economics from the Woodrow Wilson School and another in International Policy from Johns Hopkins.

When living in Washington D.C. and working as an economist for The World Bank, she learned the Suzuki method for the piano. This education has

rved her well in teaching piano, which began when the daughter of a friend requested lessons. Before that, she had never seen herself as a piano teacher, but has been teaching and loving it ever since.

Lidia actually met Mr. Suzuki when he visited Sony. At 88 years old, Mr. Suzuki was intrigued by world politics, the Sony walkman, and had a vibrant interest in life. Meeting him inspired Lidia to take Suzuki for the piano, a method that didn't exist in Brazil when she was growing up.

She has worked as an economist and assistant to Chairman (and founder) Akio Morita of Sony. She met Mr. Morita when she took Stevie Wonder to a discotheque in Tokyo while working as Wonder's translator. Mr. Morita was so impressed by Lidia that he offered her a position as his secretary on the spot. Lidia lasted six months, announced to Mr. Morita that she "hated being a secretary," to which he responded "Fine! You hate being a secretary, go to Public Relations," where she worked as a speech writer.

She also helped Mr. Morita with his autobiography, Made in Japan. Akio Morita was a great mentor for Lidia, she says, describing him as a "Renaissance man." With his philanthropy, interest in music and movies, Lidia felt he was a true 21st century person.

In 1988-1989 Lidia arrived at Princeton University from Sony as a mid-career fellow. Taking John Ikenberry's class at the Woodrow Wilson School, she dropped it because she "didn't understand a word he was saying." Professor Ikenberry must not have been offended, because he is now her husband. "When I walk around Princeton," Lidia says, "I have to pinch myself. I used to walk along the street where I now live, and Lake Carnegie is so beautiful, it's so much where I wanted to be!"

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Bonnie Schultz

Bonnie Schultz has worked as a technology and marketing writer in the Boston area. She moved here in 1997 and is the mother of two boys. Since 2007, Bonnie has been blogging about food and community happenings in the Princeton area, through her blog "The Blog That Ate New Jersey".

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