

Each beat of the pan improves a life

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By GENEVIEVE PHAGOO

TODAY the El Dorado Senior Secondary Comprehensive School has a steel pan theatre and their own steel pans thanks to the sole effort of the students of the school's steel orchestra.

Although the theatre still needs some electrical work, the students and their teacher, Fasal Mohammed, who helped them every step of the way, feel a deep sense of pride for what they have accomplished.

In 1983, El Dorado Senior Secondary Comprehensive School entered in the Music Festival and placed last. The steel orchestra did not have time to practice, they had no place to practice and the then principal didn't want pan on the curriculum. The school didn't take an interest and people looked at pan differently in those days.

But then someone took an interest in the orchestra, and the students.

Together with Fasal Mohammed, the steel orchestra borrowed some pans, and practiced in a pan yard, but that didn't work out because Mohammed did not want the students in that environment exposed to people "smoking weed and have no discipline."

So in 1984, the school held a family day and raised the funds to purchase their own pans. They practiced in the school hall and in 1985, with their own pans, they came first in the Music Festival and in 1986, they came second in school's panorama.

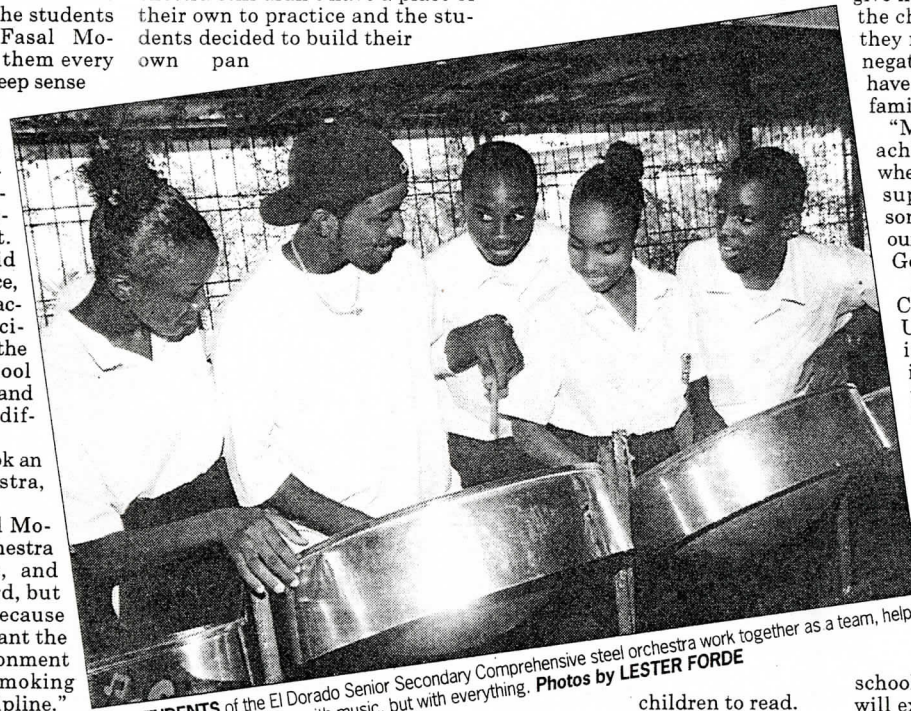
Mohammed said, "We have entered all the schools' competitions from then until the present and we have always been in the first three of the schools' pan festivals."

He stated that "...it was a real struggle to keep pan in our school. We had no assistance from the Government or Pan Trinbago, but the nice thing about it was that the

children playing pan became addicted to it, and their school work improved," adding, "at Exodus, half the young people there came from our band and the present Captain of the National Steelband Orchestra came from this school."

However, the El Dorado steel orchestra still didn't have a place of their own to practice and the students decided to build their own pan

AGAINST THE
ODDS



THE STUDENTS of the El Dorado Senior Secondary Comprehensive steel orchestra work together as a team, helping each other with not only with music, but with everything. Photos by LESTER FORDE

children to read.

For the students, steel pan is not about passing a subject; as Allan Huyghew, a form five student said, "It's all about love. We are like a family here. It's a family caring kind of love."

Another student, Carlene Stephens, said, "Steelband changed me. My mind is relaxed. The time spent here prevents us from getting idle and getting involved in drugs. We learn to interact with each other, respect different attitudes, cultures and religions."

Mohammed referred to one of the members of the orchestra whose life was changed when he became involved with the band. "He was a

delinquent and in a gang. The group took the badness out of him and we turned him into a God-fearing, church going and highly academic young man in the two years he has been with us."

For Mohammed, his reward is "I am able to take a young person and give him a life. Through steel pan the children learn discipline and they move away from most of the negatives in life. It is a family we have here. We teach God, love and family."

"My reward is seeing them achieve, and it is frustrating when businesses and people only support us if we win and want something in return. We utilise our resources and strength from God to keep us going."

El Dorado Senior Secondary Comprehensive School, as a UNESCO associated school, is planning a trip to Norway in August of this year where they will present a 30 minute documentary on the development of the steel band from emancipation to now.

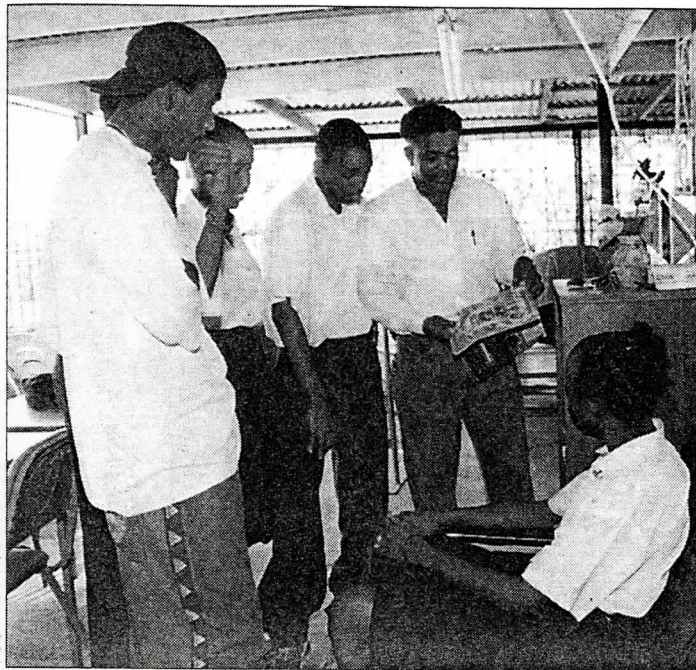
Mohammed said that "...if our documentary is accepted, we will go on to Paris. We are going to Norway to represent our school, our culture and our country."

He commented that their going will be "beneficial to every student in our

school when we return because we will exchange our instruments for computers in Norway. Every student who goes will return with two computers each for the school. We are looking to carry at least 25 people. The more people, the more computers."

But there is a problem. A return ticket to Norway is \$11,000 per person. And each student has to come up with the money for his ticket.

"We need support," said Mohammed, "The young people need all the support they can get. We are asking the community, the corporate citizens to come see us, to pay for a child's ticket. I hope the people in the community takes an interest in us."



SOME OF the members of the El Dorado Senior Secondary Comprehensive steel orchestra stop practising for a minute to see what their teacher Fasal Mohammed has found interesting in their library.