

## 2024 Spring Benefit Honoree

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### **Rhonda G. Kost and Alfred Z. Spector**

Rhonda G. Kost and Alfred Z. Spector have put their passion for music into action, as individuals, as they have raised their family, and as they have given their generous support to Hoff-Barthelson Music School. Today we honor their decades of commitment to the School community as students, parents, philanthropists, and fierce advocates for the power of music to educate and enrich lives and to provide a foundation for academic and emotional success.

Rhonda and Alfred both grew up in environments where music was appreciated and each had a smattering of music education as children, but neither had in-depth study or a background in theory or structured performance. While both dabbled in music on their own during their young adult and early career years, their attentions were in other areas. Alfred earned a BA in Applied Mathematics from Harvard and a PhD in Computer Science from Stanford, leading to a career in technology research as a professor, entrepreneur, manager, and senior executive. Rhonda earned a BS in Biology from Yale and went on to receive an MD from Harvard Medical School, and pursue a career in clinical and translational biomedical research.

Their renewed focus on music began in 2002 when their children, twins Emily and Asher (now 24), and Benjamin (now 23) were toddlers. Rhonda and Alfred knew they wanted music to become a part of their children's lives and the only questions were what instruments they might play and where they would study. The answers began to take shape when, during a holiday visit, Alfred's teenage niece played a violin piece for the extended family. Three-year-old Emily proclaimed, "I want to do that!"

A groundswell of family friends recommended Hoff-Barthelson Music School as the best place for children to study music. Rhonda took Emily for an interview with HBMS Dean Emerita Ruth Alperson. Both Rhonda and Emily were charmed by Ruth's sweet but serious demeanor and Emily began to study Suzuki violin at age four with instructor Mark Kushnir, and soon after with April Johnson. As part of the Suzuki program, Rhonda began taking her own lessons with April with whom she would study for the next 10 years. Also 4, Asher wanted to play piano, and Ruth felt his hand coordination was not quite ready for formal music study, so Alfred began to teach him basic piano on his own. When Asher was ready a year later, eager but nervous to begin lessons, Alfred made him a deal, "If you take piano lessons, I'll take piano lessons too." Asher began to study piano at the School with Oldrich Tepy and Alfred with the late Edmund Niemann. At 4-1/2, Ben also began music study, taking cello lessons with Peter Seidenberg and later Nicole Johnson. The thought crossed everyone's mind that with three siblings so close in age and this combination of instruments, perhaps someday the kids could play together. But hold that thought.

With all members of the household taking lessons at Hoff-Barthelson, music study and daily practice became the household ethos. Said Alfred, "Everybody practices. It's just what you do." Said Rhonda, "When they were little, we got creative. Some days you practice with Mom, some with Dad, before school, after dinner, only your favorite parts, only the new parts, pick a section out of a hat, make a chart, get stickers, give a concert for your stuffed animals -- whatever works to make daily practice a fun habit."

The kids developed nurturing relationships with their teachers, began to internalize the practice habit, and everyone stuck with it. Over the years the kids added other instruments and classes, and it seemed the Sectors were always at HB. Emily continued violin, added guitar lessons, a summer of piano for non-pianists, HB Rocks, jazz, chamber ensemble, orchestra, and began songwriting as well. Emily and Rhonda studied voice. Asher added the flute in 5th grade with Donna Elaine while continuing piano. Everyone took a combination of composition and music theory. Workshops, recitals, and master classes were fun ways to mark progress. Emily and Asher joined the Honors program, and music became one of the family's priorities. Some weeks, the kids ate dinner together more often in the Hoff-Barthelson lounge than at home.

The Sectors embraced the Hoff-Barthelson program that celebrated accomplishments when a child is young. "When you're six or seven and you can do things that adults can't do, that's remarkably empowering," said Alfred. Building the poise and confidence to perform on stage when you're a child is a life skill that's valuable in almost every aspect of life. The grit you develop when mastering a complex piece carries over to school and work. When we study music we gain a sense of quality, a knowledge of history, and an appreciation for art. Moreover, Rhonda and Alfred came to appreciate that Hoff-Barthelson built their family's sense of empathy and compassion, both through their interactions with the nurturing faculty, the warm peer

community of students, the musicianship of playing in ensembles, and the emotion evoked through the music itself.

The idea that the Spector children would play music together did indeed come to pass. An early effort in this area had happened when Emily and Asher were in 2nd grade and Ben was in 1st grade. While planning a celebration for the 250th “birthday” of their historic home, Alfred found a piece of early American Music written in the same year. Mr. Teply arranged it for the trio and they performed it together at the party for house. About six years later, while the siblings were all participating in the chamber ensemble program, the kids came to the Dean with the idea that they could together form their own ensemble, “because we could make sure we all practice together”, and the deal was done. Coached by Tomoko Uchino, the Spector Trio was formed, and the kids will agree, that playing together was terrific for their musicianship, and drew them even closer. At the time of Emily’s and Asher’s high school graduation for part of their honors recitals, the Trio performed a full program of Mendelssohn and Schubert, together. And as young adults in college when Emily and Asher studied at Harvard and Ben studied at MIT, they continued to play and perform together in Cambridge, studying with a local chamber coach. Apart from the trio, their musical fluency had made it easy as incoming college students to find instant community with peers in orchestras, bands, and jam sessions. Years later, as young adults living in different cities, when they convene for family holidays and events, the Spectors always make time to play together. Sharing music has developed into one of the ways the family communicates and stays connected.

In their professional lives, Rhonda and Alfred are both leaders in their fields. Rhonda currently works as a Professor and Clinical Research officer at Rockefeller University where she has worked for 27 years. Alfred has held senior positions at IBM, Google, and Two Sigma, and is now a Blackstone consultant and Visiting Scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Rhonda joined the Hoff-Barthelson board in 2008 and has served on the Financial Aid Committee, the Development Committee, the Strategic Planning Committee, the Facilities and Technology Committee, the Executive Committee, and was the Board Chair from 2020 to 2023, helping to successfully guide the School through the pandemic with a steady hand. She has worked tirelessly to promote the School and music education in general, with a focus on program excellence, community, sustainability, and access to music education for everyone.

The family has generously supported Hoff-Barthelson throughout their tenure at the School and beyond. “We want to give back to the School because it’s given so much to our family. Our children will have the gift of music their whole lives. They’ll be playing together as adults and with their children. The School is a treasure to us and to the entire community. So many things are just right about the School – the teachers, the nurturing community, the performance opportunities, the workshops, and the support throughout. We wouldn’t be who we are without Hoff-Barthelson,” said Rhonda. And Hoff-Barthelson wouldn’t be who we are without Rhonda Kost, Alfred Spector, and the entire family. We are thrilled to honor them and their many contributions to the school. Please join us in thanking them for their time, dedication, participation, and their music.