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Meet the Activist Who Created a Scholarship Program When She Was Just 12

Mumbai-based student Mrinalini Somanı started the WE Concert, a project that uses the power of music to fund an education for the underprivileged

Riddhi Chakraborty · Aug 17, 2018



Mrinalini Somanı's WE Concert provides a platform for Mumbai's students from across social and economic worlds to come together for the performing arts and raise money to fund scholarships for underprivileged children.

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It's safe to say that creating scholarship projects for underprivileged kids isn't the first thing on every 12-year old's mind. Mrinalini Somani however, managed to prove she's one of a kind. The young Mumbai-based musician/activist is responsible for starting the WE Concert, a project that uses the power of music to fund an education for those who need it.

"It started off as an idea to have it in my backyard, with a few friends, a very small thing," the now-17-year old Somani tells *Rolling Stone India* about the initiative she created in partnership with NGO Salaam Bombay Foundation five years ago—when she was just 12. "Of course it's become much bigger over the years than we could have anticipated."

WE Concert provides a platform for Mumbai's students from across social and economic worlds to come together for the performing arts and raise money to fund scholarships for underprivileged children across the city. The concert features rock, pop and Bollywood performances by students from some of the most prestigious schools in the city as well as students attending Salaam Bombay Foundation's Academy for the Arts. The funds raised from the event sponsor scholarships at the Academy which include in-school leadership programs, after-school sports, arts and media academics and more.



WE Concert's 2017 edition saw students from 13 schools across Mumbai join the lineup.

While the project started at one school—Cathedral and John Connon—last year's WE Concert witnessed students participating from 13 schools across Mumbai including the Bombay International School, BD Somani, Bombay Scottish, Oberoi International, Singapore International, Jamnabai Narsee and Podar International. According to Somani, 2018 will see an additional four schools from Mumbai join the lineup and international students from the United Kingdom flying in for the concert on August 25th at the Royal Opera House, Mumbai. The goal for this year is to raise enough funds to sponsor the education of 750 kids.

Below are excerpts from our conversation with Somani about the WE Concert, her partnership with Salaam Bombay and her future goals for the project.

What sparked the idea to start the WE Concert in 2013?

I've been working with Salaam Bombay for a really long time, and I got a chance to meet some of the students of the arts academy and talk to them. Through our conversations I realized that we weren't so different; We had the same likes and dislikes, we were very passionate about the arts, we all wanted to sing and dance, we liked the same movies and actors. The only difference was that we were from different backgrounds and they hadn't been as fortunate as I was to get the privileges and opportunities I have today. That's what sparked the idea for me— I wanted to help kids who, because of luck, end up in circumstances that don't allow them to pursue the arts or have the same opportunities as us. I wanted to give them a chance to do that.

I started by asking a few of my friends, 'This is my idea. Would you like to join in? Let's help someone do something better. Use music to bring people from different backgrounds together and use music to achieve something that's bigger than all of us.' Of course it's become much bigger over the years than we could have anticipated. We ended up performing at Blue Frog for the first four years and since last year we've been performing at the Royal Opera House which is even bigger. It's gone from having 20 participants to 80 participants, it's become bigger in scale, and quality. The talent has reached the next level as well. The kids who are performing from both the academy and private schools are all so motivated and ambitious that's its amazing to see them all on stage.

Is there one moment over the last five years that really stands out where you truly saw the impact you've made by starting this project?

The moment in the last five years.. there's no one moment that stands out where I saw the impact, but I think I'm seeing it happen throughout. All these kids who started the show with us are still there and new people are joining again and again, and the outreach is more. Interacting with the kids from the academy every year and realizing where they've reached... We've literally grown up together now. I know a lot of the kids from the academy really well because we interacted through this process and outside it. It's a continuous cycle and its amazing to see how we can keep helping more and more kids.

What is your long-term vision for the WE Concert's growth in the future?

As for the long term vision. I see WE as something that can keep going. I've always scheduled the show and made sure everyone's rehearsing according to the schedule, I've helped out with arrangements of music as well, this year more than ever I've been doing that. I'd like to keep doing that, keep helping out, keep running the show, keep making it bigger and letting it reach another level. This year we have girls coming from UK to India to perform, which is my band, because I'm now at a boarding school in U.K. called Sherborne Girls. you could say its become a global event, and I think that we can get more bands from all over the world to come and make it even bigger. Its already grown so much and helped so many people and reached so many people that maybe in 10 years we'll be performing somewhere in new York, in Madison square or something.. you never know. It's exciting to think about it.

My long-term vision is for it to keep growing, keep getting better and keep surprising us. Because this whole show has constantly surprised me. When [Blue Frog shut down \(in 2016\)](#) we were completely distraught, we didn't know what was going to happen. And then Royal Opera House came and we got an even bigger chance. Its just amazing how every time we think there's something that's gonna stop us, it just pushes us forward and we end up doing more and more. This time, we have some amazing pieces happening. We have a jazz and Hindustani fusion piece, we have four-part harmonies in sound of silence, and we have an aerial silk act in the dance, and its bigger than I could have ever imagined, Hopefully it just keeps going that way.

Learn more about the WE Concert [here](#)

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