Distributed by UW News Service, December 22, 2025

Link to original story: <https://www.uwp.edu/explore/news/f25jeromeporter.cfm>

**Finding His Voice: Jerome Porter’s Journey Through Music at UW-Parkside**

Story by UW-Parkside

Under the bright stage lights, Jerome Porter clutched his trumpet, heart pounding as the first notes of his original composition, Walk on a Rainy Street, filled the hall. It was his freshman year, the first time he’d ever performed one of his own songs for a live audience.  
  
“I remember looking down at the beginning of it, just thinking, this is really happening,” Jerome said. “I wouldn’t have gotten this opportunity anywhere else. This was the right step. This is where I need to be.” That moment marked the beginning of Jerome’s journey not just as a musician, but as an artist finding his voice at UW-Parkside.  
  
Russ Johnson, a Professor of Jazz in the UW-Parkside Music Department, has known Jerome since his days as a promising high school musician. “If I had to describe Jerome in one word, it would be creativity. We try to help nurture that, but it’s so internal to him that we just have to give him space to flourish.”  
  
Born in Chicago and raised in Kenosha, Jerome grew up surrounded by music. “My mom would play music while cleaning or whenever she felt like it,” he said. “It just stuck with me; it became part of my personality.”  
  
Jerome’s passion for sound began in elementary school. What started as a hesitant experiment soon grew into a decade-long dedication. By high school, Jerome was performing in jazz and concert bands and discovering his love for composition. When choosing a college, he looked for a place where he could expand that creative spark. “Parkside offered more of what I wanted, the composition aspect, actually being able to write music. So I made the decision to come here,” Jerome explained.

Johnson explains that, while Jerome is naturally a gifted musician, UW-Parkside has provided a supportive and nurturing environment to empower Jerome to refine his raw musical talent. “I could not imagine a better fit for Jerome on the path that he’s on. I think one thing that we’re good at as a department is seeing Jerome for who he is and what he brings to the table. We foster his individuality and help him grow into the artist he’s meant to be,” Johnson said.  
  
Jerome’s time at Parkside has been filled with opportunities, performances, collaborations, and personal growth. “There are so many resources here. You just have to go out there and take them,” he said.  
Johnson praises Jerome for his ambition and initiative. “Jerome has had so many opportunities here, and to his credit, he’s jumped into all of them. That’s not something every student does. It’s all about building musicianship and giving them experiences that prepare them for success down the road,” he said.

One early highlight was that freshman-year concert, but it wouldn’t be his last major performance. Jerome has since composed and performed original pieces for campus events, including UW-Parkside’s annual Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration.  
  
Johnson reflects on witnessing Jerome’s growth firsthand. “Watching Jerome walk up to the microphone at the MLK Celebration to discuss his composition, I had tears in my eyes. You could see that confidence and growth. Some of that comes with age, but a lot of it comes from the opportunities he’s had here that have fostered that belief in himself,” he said.  
  
His sophomore-year piece, The Birth of Freedom, became one of his proudest accomplishments. “It was about the idea that freedom exists, but it won’t if you don’t go after it,” he said. “People came up to me afterward and told me how much it moved them. That’s all I ever want, for people to feel something from my music.”

Jerome’s professors have played a major role in his development. He credits mentors like Russ Johnson, Laura Rexroth, and Ayesu Lartey, as well as the supportive faculty in the music department. “The music department feels like home to me,” he said. “Everyone is welcoming. If I ever need anything, I can just talk to someone there.”  
  
Outside of music, Jerome found another home in the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. “Every time I go there, I feel welcome,” he said. “They’ve given me opportunities to perform, and they make me feel like I belong.”  
  
For Jerome, UW-Parkside represents much more than academics; it represents growth. “Parkside to me means growth, patience, and improvement,” he said. “It’s that desire to keep going when things get tough.”

“Jerome is the definition of resilience. There have been battles he’s faced as a student, but he’s learned to deal with those things more quickly, to get ahead of them rather than let them weigh him down,” Johnson asserts.  
  
He’s faced challenges, from financial uncertainty to self-doubt, but the university community helped him navigate both. With support from financial aid staff and mentors like Wendy Johnson, Jerome was able to secure grants and scholarships to make college possible. “They really worked with me,” he said. “It’s been smooth sailing, and I’m very appreciative.”  
  
Through Parkside, he’s also found ways to manage emotional challenges and build confidence. “People here listen and help you get through it,” he said. “I’ve learned to be patient with myself, and to be unapologetic about who I am.”  
  
Johnson asserts that, as inspiring as Jerome’s personal growth has been, he has also affected change among UW-Parkside’s faculty and programs. “Part of what makes Jerome’s story so powerful is that he’s helped guide us as a department; he’s shown us what our program can be. In many ways, he’s helping us shape who we want to be for future students,” he explained.

Jerome plans to graduate in 2027 with a degree in contemporary commercial music and a concentration in composition. From there, he hopes to take his music beyond the classroom to stages, studios, and airwaves. “My goal is to get my music known and released to get it on the radio,” he said. “I want to build my brand, get my own studio, and just keep creating.”  
  
Parkside, he says, has given him the tools and the confidence to make those dreams real. “It’s preparing me for what the real world has coming,” he said. “But it’s also made me feel like it’s manageable, like my goals are actually within reach.”

When asked what advice he’d give to future students, Jerome smiled before answering. “Be yourself,” he said. “Go out there and get those opportunities. Be patient with yourself, your future self will thank you.”

Johnson expressed his amazement at who Jerome is not only as a well-rounded musician, but also as a person. “He’s special. I can’t wait to see who he becomes as a human being as well as a musician, because they’re both going to be fantastic. And being a great human being comes first.”