

**12TH GRADE WINNER:
JONATHAN M.
BLUE SPRINGS HIGH SCHOOL**

The title of Kindest Kansas Citian cannot be summed up to one person for me, but there is one couple in Kansas City that earns the title in tandem: James and Angela Ward. James and Angela Ward are both famous jazz musicians based in Kansas City whose influence reaches to places like New York City and even internationally to places like China. With both being extremely accomplished musicians, Kansas City is extremely fortunate that they make the time to focus on educating and cultivating young musicians like me and my peers in the jazz scene. Together, they've shown me that while it's very important to excel in your own career, it is also just as important to give back to the community that supports you.

The jazz scene in Kansas City can be a scary place to navigate alone. Most gigs are built on relationships, and some big players in the scene can be very intimidating. If you're completely new to playing jazz, there's a whole world of knowledge that you don't have yet. This was my exact experience as a new trombone player coming on the scene in the summer of 2024. I was lost, unsure of how to improve as a musician, and with little to no connections. This is until one night at a Blue Room jam session, where I met Angela Ward.

After seeing me play, Mrs. Ward invited me to join the band that she had started with her husband, the Comprehensive Arts Institute Jazz Band. The CAI jazz band is a musical group that consistently gigs around Kansas City with a focus on the education and integration of its members into the music scene. When I first started playing with the band, I was completely unaware of the nuances that came with jazz improvisation. What notes you can play over each chord, what the form and chord progression of songs were, and how to improve these aspects of my playing. Through hands-on playing and professional gigging experience, as well as thorough instruction from both Mr. and Mrs. Ward, they've crafted each member of the band into extremely functional musicians. Mrs. Ward even went so far as to give me free piano lessons, and Mr. Ward helped me break down the aspects of improvisation that I had struggled with in the past. Both of them invited me to sit in with them at gigs with larger name musicians in Kansas City such as Amber Underwood. With all their combined efforts, their investment in the young musicians of Kansas City is undeniable.

Together, the Wards have nurtured the talents of each musician who has gone through their program. They were patient with me even when I didn't know what I was doing at gigs when I started in their program, and while many teachers don't take the time to help students who are struggling Mr. and Mrs. Ward have both given me one-on-one lessons in jazz music theory to help me progress. They've both given direction to my musical career and helped me realize that it is possible for me to pursue my passion as a musician. James and Angela Ward are not just the kindest Kansas Citians I know; they are the most patient, most impressive, and most inspiring.