Congratulations to all the deserving, outstanding educators who were nominated to be one of the three 2015 – 2016 Educators of the Year! We have included excerpts from the nominees’ responses to our inquiries regarding their experience, teaching styles and music programs. The evident enthusiasm, devotion, and humor shown in these responses underscore the caliber of each and every nominee.

We hope that by sharing some of their stories you will experience the same moments of inspiration and joy that we did. Thank you to those who took time to nominate and recognize your colleagues, and thank you to all the nominees for providing candid, honest, and motivational insights into your day-to-day challenges and successes.

ANGELA WYATT

Northview Elementary, Oak Ridge Elementary School of Leadership, Health & Environmental Sciences | Rosemount-Apple Valley-Eagan school district | Eagan, MN

Describe why you think you were nominated for this award.

Although I am not sure why I was nominated it may be partly due to the Band For All instrument donation program I implemented in 2007. This program was created as a way to increase diversity in all District 196 bands. Students who are on free or reduced lunch may use a donated instrument for a one-time fee of $20. This year, over 600 students in District 196 are able to participate in band because there is a Band For All instrument available to them… I love teaching beginning band. As their first instrumental teacher, my students’ skills reflect my teaching. If they have a bad habit there is no previous teacher to blame; it all comes back to me. This motivates me to work hard so everyone has a strong start. Beginning summer band lessons are my favorite teaching of the year; students are so excited and ready to learn. I enjoy the challenge of finding fun and creative solutions to whatever my students find challenging. And yes, fifth graders are able to play with nuance! …

How would your students describe you?

“Not the best in the world at electronics, but pretty good at the instruments!” (one of my students was referring to a Smart Board problem we had earlier this year). I think they would say I am energetic, have high expectations and am passionate about the music.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

The biggest obstacle while teaching is remembering to not blame the learner for not understanding or playing correctly but to simply work on finding out how to help them learn. I work on this every day.
SCOTT ERICKSON
Sanford Middle School | Minneapolis Public Schools | Minneapolis, MN

Describe your approach to your job.

My approach is to take very seriously the job of getting these students ready to play in high school. No matter what a student’s own intentions might be, no matter what their cultural or socioeconomic background, I try my best to make them see that musicianship is musicianship. I also try to make it as fun as possible, selecting popular and film music repertoire alongside the ‘serious’ stuff, but always seeking authentic, challenging arrangements… I’m proud to say that over 90% of my concert band kids go on to play in high school.

How would your students describe you?

Funny and loud. I like to tell musical stories, stuff that happened to me when I was a band student way back when, or on the bandstand later in life… Shouty, because I have a big voice and use it effectively – whether in praise or… not. But always-always-always because I want them to be their best.

What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

Several years ago, at our spring concert, my 8th graders presented me with a beautiful baton and case – and the story of how my old baton REALLY got broken in their 6th grade year one day when I had a sub. On the same night, it was formally announced that the band position at Sanford was expanding to full-time.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

I think my biggest obstacle has been finding my voice with adults. I tend to think that the work speaks for itself when we put on concerts, but I don’t think that many understand the hours of preparation (on my side) and the hours of practice (from the students) that go into it. I’ve overcome this by taking on a leadership role in the building beyond my normal duties, where I have become more comfortable articulating not only the needs of the band program, but all of the arts and specialists I represent.

TODD BURKHOLDER
Armstrong High School | Robbinsdale Area Schools | Plymouth, MN

What is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

I have had many big dreams as I work with students. One main goal is to build student leaders who have confidence with their music performances and who share the vision of our goals that we have in the music program. It is amazing as a teacher seeing students enter as 9th graders learning about the program then developing into such quality student musicians and leaders. I know it is a lofty thought but I feel like we are teaching students how to develop as people and enjoy quality lives through the discipline of music.
My greatest satisfaction is listening to students who have long graduated from our music department who share meaningful memories of their time learning music and performing with their friends.

What are your career goals?

My main goal in my career is to build a band program that is balanced, quality and sustainable in all areas long after I have left my job…

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

I think the biggest obstacle to my career has been the endurance factor trying to find the energy to complete each year of teaching. Every school year presents a mountain to climb and it takes everything within me to complete it. I could not do this job without outstanding colleagues at every level, terrific administrators, boosters and a wonderful wife who understands that she married a high school band director who will not be at home over 100 evenings out of every school year.

Who do you most admire in the music education field and why?

The person I admire most in the music education field is Dr. Harold Krueger, a retired music professor from Augustana University in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I attended Augustana because of this man and he means the world to thousands of music students who studied with him… He was a music innovator who pushed the envelope with music genres and he was able to totally draw his college students into his vision and goals. Certain music teachers have this intangible persona where students will do virtually anything for an instructor and Doc Krueger had this humble yet magnetic personality leading all of us to want to be like him and to teach like him.

MARA SYMAN

Anderson Elementary School, Lake Elmo Elementary School, Oak Park Elementary School | Bayport, Lake Elmo and Stillwater, MN

Describe your approach to your job.

I take an inclusive approach to my job. I work to make sure that all students feel like they belong even if they are not the best player. It can be hard to learn a new skill. I want students to know they are cared about. As long as they are trying, they are successful.

Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

One thing I’d like to accomplish… is to find an efficient way to send annotated videos of students’ playing to their parents. Students who are just starting an instrument need a lot of reminders and many parents don’t know what to look for. I want to find a simple way to send examples of postures, hand positioning, tone, articulation, note names, etc. so parents can get more involved with their student’s learning. With so many students, it is a huge challenge to individualize communication.
What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

The biggest obstacle so far has been changing schools and positions each year. In three years, I’ve taught at five elementary schools. With each new school comes a new schedule, a new environment, and a new set of students with new needs. Most recently, I started at a school with a diverse population of families that speak many languages. In this environment, some of my most frequently used strategies to communicate with families did not work. I couldn’t support the home-school connection all of my students need. Though I was new to the situation, the situation wasn’t new to the school. My principal and coworkers have been building this community for years. I have learned to lean on the experienced classroom and ELL teachers, who know the students and families better than I do, to help me make connections and provide information. I have also learned to ask more questions, no matter what they are. I have discovered an abundance of information about support programs and local organizations that I can use to make sure all students who want to play an instrument have that opportunity. I am now able to use these resources to recognize when other students across the district need assistance.

CAMMI BIENKOWSKI

Eden Prairie Elementary School | Eden Prairie, MN

Describe your approach to your job.

How can I connect better with students to develop their intrinsic motivation for becoming musicians?

What are your career goals?

…I will continue to use experiences to encourage the band students at all levels to see what their musical journey can look like.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career so far?

When a student needs to/ wants to quit his/her instrument. Communication! Discuss with the student, parent and/or teacher what the issue is and see if there is a solution we can find to continue their learning.

Who do you most admire in the music education field and why?

Devoted directors (who are) continuing to learn ways to grow success in their students.

How are you involved in music/music education outside of the school day?

I have played in the instrumental groups at my church along with leading worship time for children and played in a big band and a teacher rock group. I teach privately. I live in the community I teach...
JANA MECKLER

Pearson 6th Grade Center | Shakopee, MN

Describe your approach to your job.

Every day is an opportunity to reach students. I bring a contagious energy to the classroom and lessons, keeping a quick-paced and positive learning atmosphere. I love learning from the students—they teach ME something new daily. My teaching philosophy is “Creativity through the enjoyment of music.” I incorporate learning music by ear (especially in jazz band) and non-traditional methods such as the use of iPads to visually depict the dynamic terrain of a piece during rehearsal. This job is constantly evolving, never stagnant, and always an opportunity for the students and me to improve, digging deeper into musicality every time we work together.

Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

I would like to accomplish a more broad awareness of the arts through multi-media or multiple fine arts performances. For example, one of my percussionists is a tap dancer, so I asked him if he’d be willing to tap at our next jazz concert to a song of his choice. In concert band, perhaps projecting images that fit one of our pieces while we perform.

How would your students describe you?

My students would describe me as dedicated, energetic, joyful, encouraging, and a bit wacky. :)

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

My husband and I moved back to the Twin Cities during the crash in 2008. I went from long-term subbing position to long-term subbing position until eventually I could find a full-time position again. This period was very challenging, but I never lost sight of my love for teaching and was determined to succeed as a band director. I am glad I never lost sight of this vision.

SCOTT SATER

Shakopee Easter Junior High School | Shakopee, MN

Describe your approach to your job.

My mantra: I may not be able to reach every kid that I teach, but I need to reach FOR every kid. I love kids, and I love creating art with them… This is a ministry of the heart and the ears. We paint the air in the room every day with colors. And some of them remember this for life.
How would your students describe you?

Yesterday I was interviewed by the Communications Director of our Shakopee Public Schools District Office. He came to talk to me about our MMEA Performance on February 11th… He also interviewed a ninth grade student of mine. She told him that I explain things well so that they understand what we are aimed at. She shared that I teach them to believe in themselves, and demonstrate an energy to them that helps them feel close to each other. She shared that I give them life lessons, and that I believe in them, and risked this audition to MMEA. And how powerful that has been in shaping their year. I have had students tell me that I tell the best stories, that I obviously love what I do. My students have told me that they miss my class when they “graduate” from the junior high, and then they visit me regularly. They have told me that I never get angry, but only offer enthusiasm and encouragement. They have described me as caring, compassionate, understanding, patient, committed, and as their “friend.” They have told me that they care about me. When my son died last year, my 8th and 9th Grade Bands surrounded me with cards, gifts, and hugs. They signed a scrapbook with messages that I will keep for life. They gave me a little black book with messages inside. “Thank you for making my day better. Thank you for being a positive influence in my life,” and “You’re an inspirational person.” I have been in the path of their love and affirmations in a way that has knocked me over. Their effusive love to me ~ reminds me that even in our darkest of times…. students can shine their light on us.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career, and how did you overcome it?

For years I thought that I could “save” all of my students from their difficult lives. I knew better than to really believe that. But when I was “new,” if they left my band or choir rehearsal sad, I felt that I had not done enough. I would connect with them as any caring teacher does. But sadly, I would “carry” it home with me in worry. Particularly one student seemed consistently depressed. My wife reminded me that our counselors, their friends and families can “be there” for them. I knew instinctively that she was right. Yet…. I would carry the burden, checking in with them. Gradually I learned that reminding them to “play their day” in rehearsals, with conviction and commitment was the best that I could give them. Over the years, I was able to develop and refine ways to “touch base,” with things like, “Hey, you look kind of sad today! Play that, OK?!” or a light comment after, “Thanks for your good playing today! It looks like a tough one. I’m really glad you’re here!” Something like that… Just being there as a positive role model in creating a safe place for my students to find music, and themselves… is something that I CAN do.

JEFF SCHOENING

Treynor Community Schools | Treynor, IA

Describe your approach to your job.

I approach my job as an educator who happens to teach instrumental music. There are so many ways to relate music to other subjects, world events and history. It makes the music so much more alive and real if the students can see how it ties into all the other disciplines they study…
What are your career goals?

My career goals are to continue growing our program not only in numbers but in quality of performance. I have maybe 4-5 years left before I retire, and I do not plan on coasting to the end. My goal is to have the absolute best band I have ever had the day I hang it up.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

I would have to say just getting through that first year of teaching was for me, and many other of my colleagues have agreed, the biggest obstacle. No matter how hard you prepare for that first job, you really don’t understand how overwhelming it can be until you’re in the middle of it. But, you put your head down and work hard. You call on friends and mentors for advice, and ask for help when you need it. You have to want to continue getting better as a musician and a teacher. I still do that today after 32 years.

Who do you most admire in the music education field and why?

I have had so many great teachers that have mentored me throughout my career. Great teachers here in Iowa like Steve Lawson and Kevin Linder. My good friend Larry Green, from Columbia, MO, has taught me so much about rehearsal techniques and jazz pedagogy. On the national level my favorite teacher is Charles Menghini from VanderCook in Chicago. I took my band there on a music department trip and had the good fortune of have Dr. Menghini do a clinic for us. He threw every ounce of energy he had into that hour clinic, and afterward, as he wiped the sweat from his brow, he winked at me and said, “It’s fun to work hard.” I never forgot that.

MARLA JANAK

Springfield Platteview Community Schools | Springfield, NE

Describe your approach to your job.

Each year is a new challenge in trying to come up with new ideas that will make band fun for the kids and still get the curriculum covered in their band books. I use things like practice champions in each section, playing tests on SmartMusic sent home to parents, book completion goals and treat rewards to name a few. I spend a lot of time listening to new music to find the pieces that fit the sections in the band with the most strength. I feel that if you want the students to be on top of things in class then as a teacher one must lead them by being organized and ready to teach every day. It’s all about saying what you mean and following through.

What are your career goals?

My career goal is to improve in the area of technology. The students today have access to just about anything on the internet from free lessons to all kinds of performances. I would like to be able to add more web sites and music applications to supplement my curriculum.
What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

The biggest obstacle in my teaching career is time. Each year I seem to get less and less contact time to work with the band students. I have to make the very most out of the little time I get with the students. To overcome this obstacle I have had to be super organized and have had to come up with new ideas to promote more home practice. I try to make each lesson and band rehearsal something the kids look forward to each week. Setting goals and rewarding the kids for their accomplishments makes each week a fun learning experience even if it's for a 20 minute lesson.

LUCINDA DAVIS

Robbinsdale Area Schools | Robbinsdale, MN

What do you consider your finest accomplishment and why?

Many of my former students have gone on to great things in the field of music. Several have become wonderful band directors, one helped to develop new software for musicians, and others have continued to perform as professionals. Most who still play are active as members of community bands or orchestras, adding to the richness of their lives and those touched by their performances. Still others have busy private studios where they instruct both children and adults on their instruments, paying it forward… My finest accomplishment as a music educator has been to be a part of my students' success, to carry forth the love for and skills to create great music.

What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

I will always treasure being invited to recitals, graduations, weddings, and other performances of former students. But above them all is the memory of a particular afternoon when I had three surprise visitors at school. A young couple stopped by on their way home from the hospital so that their old band director could meet and hold their newborn baby girl.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

Identifying the single biggest obstacle in my teaching career is very difficult. Yet when I think of all the obstacles as a whole, I believe they can all be traced back to the basic belief that music, and certainly playing an instrument, is not of core importance to one's education or quality of life. High scores on standardized tests in math and reading, and the pursuit of other initiatives and programs have become the focus of most schools. Because of that persistent point of view, that music is for fun and entertainment but not a truly important part of education, many programs and classes are not afforded the budgets, classroom space, scheduling priority, or respect that they need to thrive. Unfortunately I have not overcome this obstacle, but I continue to model my belief that music is fundamental, to clear what hurdles I can each day in the best interests of my students, and to help others understand that participation in music is directly related to success in every other area of education and of life.
LAURI FRANCIS

North Star Middle School | Eau Claire, WI

Describe why you think you were nominated for this award.

As written by one of her students: Lauri is my amazing 6th grade band director and is amazing at her job. She is always going beyond her job by taking students off to the side to have them test for a higher band or helping them with something. She is very encouraging, helpful, awesome and amazing. She always pushes all of us to strive to be our best and to get better in band. We also want this to be the last award that she gets before retiring next year. She doesn’t think that she deserves it, but ALL of her students think she does!

Describe your approach to your job.

As written by one of her students: She approaches her job every day with a smile. She is ready to do anything from teaching new things to perfecting.

Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

As written by one of her students: She would like to make people see that with a little bit of elbow grease our middle school band can do better than the high school band.

What are your career goals?

As written by one of her students: To give students experience with many genres of music.

EMILY DEUTSCH

Central Lyon Community School | Rock Rapids, IA

Describe your approach to your job.

It’s important not to approach it like a “job”, but a motivating position you happen to get paid for! Each day there’s something new to teach, learn, perform, practice; I try to approach each day like it’s brand new, because it is new for our students! They have the opportunity to learn something new and although it’s the same old material for us as directors, we need to approach it with a new attitude for our students.
Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

I would love to be able to provide quality instruments in a quality space for all students who want to participate in our band ensembles. For our district, that is dreaming big! Our current space is maxed out. We are unable to fit any more instruments, equipment, or bodies into our band room. Our percussion is stuck using two timpani drums because we don’t have room for four or five. The students sit shoulder to shoulder during rehearsals because we've had to cram so many chairs into the small space. I would love to provide a larger space so our students have room to practice and I have room to move in between students while we rehearse. I would like to have quality school-owned instruments that I can loan out to students who need an instrument to use...

What has been the biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

Again, in just eight years of teaching I know there are going to be many more obstacles, but at the moment, my biggest obstacle that I overcame was the attitude that our school and community had toward the band program when I moved in. I believe the school and community respected the program, but it wasn’t taken seriously. I have always believed, if YOU do not advocate, who will? Building the public relations side of our band program helped change the view of the program. Currently, our school and community take the students and band program more seriously, they have begun to give priority to some of our events, and many community members have even asked for special performances from our band.

MIKE HALSTENSON
Anoka High School | Anoka, MN

What are your career goals?

I would like to have some of my music published. I would also love to have the opportunity to conduct a professional orchestra. I would love to play piano in a really, really great rock band.

What do you consider your finest accomplishment and why?

Through all of my different endeavors, I have given a great deal of music to our community. This has inspired a greater awareness of what music can add to the community itself.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

My biggest obstacle has always been that I don’t feel that I am skilled enough to accomplish what I want. I keep trying to overcome this by working hard.

Who do you most admire in the music education field and why?

Michelle Hayes (choir director at Anoka High School) – She is one of the few people who balances a professional singing career with a teaching career. She is able to bring the experience of singing with world class musicians to the classroom...
Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

6th grade band every day… Currently I see the beginners every other day and that is just not enough contact time for retention.

What are your career goals?

One career goal is to work on recruitment and retention of students. I need to work on having my kids be more visible in the elementary schools throughout the year instead of just at recruiting time. Also being more visible out in the community…

What do you consider your finest accomplishment and why?

Anyone who knows me, knows that I am not a jazzer. I prefer concert band, even marching band and pep band over jazz band. So when I taught at Marcus-Meriden-Cleghorn, a school known for having a dominant jazz program, I struggled… However, over the span of my 5 years there, with hard work from the students, we went from not qualifying for Iowa Jazz Championships to finally making it, and eventually placing at Jazz Championships.

What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

My most memorable moment in my career so far was when a former student nominated me for the Charles E. Lakin Outstanding Teacher Award. To have had such an impact on a student that she would be compelled to write an extensive essay and nominate me is humbling and makes me feel proud to have had such a positive influence on that student.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

The biggest obstacle so far in my career has been working with a schedule that was not beneficial to the music program. For years I only saw my students every other day, or every three days for rehearsal. After a lot of research and compiling schedules of other area schools our size, our school made a huge change and now I see my 7th and 8th grade bands every day. It’s been two years since we’ve changed schedules and the difference in the students’ playing is amazing.
Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

This may sound simple but I dream of having the time and resources (instruments, staff, money) to do what’s best for my students. We recently started a mariachi program at our school and it has been a GREAT addition. What we struggle with now is the “man power” to continue that to its full potential. To me, dreaming big is to have more staff and resources, whether it is money or instruments, to help provide more connections for our students.

What are your career goals?

My career goal is to continue making a difference in students’ lives. I find the longer I teach, the more I enjoy starting beginners. With my constant contact with the high school students, I truly see what they can achieve and I know that the beginner year is so very important…

What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

My most memorable moment is somewhat of a selfish moment. My son auditioned for the Major Landers Scholarship for Iowa seniors who are planning on majoring in music education at an Iowa college. Being at my son’s side (on the piano bench!) for that when he won and seeing him thrive in his music education classes in college is by far the most memorable moment for me.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

One of my biggest obstacles was having enough instruments for students who would not be able to afford one to play. We approached our administration who gave us their blessing to start an “instrument drive” in the community. We also traded in some older school instruments that would cost too much to repair for some “basic” instruments (flute, clarinet, trumpet, trombone). We continue to have people donate instruments to our program and we are able to check out instruments to those in need each year.

Describe your approach to your job.

For me, teaching music is both a science and an art and I try very hard to keep the balance between effective pedagogical techniques and interpersonal relationships. I like to laugh and have a good time, but I also like to be organized and “on top of my game”.

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Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

I would love to commission a new piece for one of my bands. I realize this would take a financial and time commitment, but I believe the benefit would be worth it. I think my students would love the “process” of working with a composer and would feel a great sense of satisfaction in “premiering” a piece written just for them.

What are your career goals?

I have accomplished many career goals in my 30 years, but I still have things I would like to pursue. For example, I would like to serve as a mentor to younger teachers in the field. I recognize teaching isn’t easy and young teachers need mentors to look to for guidance. In addition, I would like to perform at a music convention with one of my bands. I did this a number of years ago, and I would like to do it again.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

Honestly, I have been blessed with few obstacles. I have had excellent students to work with, amazing colleagues… reasonable administrators who support my program, and a community that appreciates what the arts, and music specifically, can do for students as well as the community…

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ELIZABETH HARWOOD

Kasson-Mantorville Middle School | Kasson, MN

Describe why you think you were nominated for this award.

…One of the most exciting things I’ve done is created personalized reports for parents that indicate how their student is progressing on their instrument each quarter. Band parents whose students are in the primary stages of learning an instrument, want to have more specific feedback on what we worked on in class, and exactly how well the student is progressing. Although I maintain an A-F grade book, I also email home standards-based grading reports that are easily defined and understood… So, using an ad-hoc report in Infinite Campus, a Google sheet and a Google document, I merge everything together using Autocrat… I’ve also worked on a wide variety of projects to advocate for the music and band program. Here are a few highlights from recent years:

• I have brought in professional performers for school-wide assemblies and in-class demonstrations.
• I have successfully advocated for additional staffing almost every year that I’ve been teaching middle school band, specifically for small-group band lessons.
• In addition to donated flutes, clarinets, trumpets and trombones, our school has added 11 double F horns, 16 tubas and a piccolo to the middle school inventory to accommodate the increase in participation.
• Last year, a local printing company (Images) helped me develop a logo for our school’s music department. A portion of the proceeds from their sales are donated directly to us.
• To promote Music in Our Schools Month, I used the Audio Backpack in Minnesota Public Radio’s website (https://apps.classicalmpr.org/audio-backpack/) to play sound clips of various music pieces over the loudspeakers for the entire middle school. I shared my playlist with our school secretary, wrote up a brief introduction to the music, and played the 30-second clip. The student body enjoyed hearing the pieces, especially when we played “Black Angels” by Crumb on Friday the 13th!!
• I occasionally accompany the middle school choirs and high school solo and ensemble contest.
• I serve on several committees in the building, district, and union.
• I coordinate most of the grant writing for the music department.
I serve our middle school as the peer coaching and mentoring coordinator for non-tenured teachers. I feel fortunate to work in a district with extremely talented musicians who are very giving of their time, energy and expertise. We work together as a team, creating an environment that encourages growth in all facets of education. In the 15 years that I have taught at Kasson-Mantorville, our music team has remained committed to excellence in our performances, and actively fostered a community of arts supporters. As a result, our district is building a state-of-the-art performing arts center that will be large enough to accommodate our biggest events with room to grow. Also, we are in the beginning stages of securing a commissioned band piece to celebrate its opening in August 2016. I’m very proud to be part of this community, and am thankful for the support we receive from our local businesses and vendors, like Schmitt Music. It’s the partnership with all members of the community that lead to successes, like my most recent band concert which included 110 beginners out of a class of 150 students!

Describe your approach to your job.

Be positive. Smile. See the world for what it can be, rather than what it is. Yet maintain a heavy dose of reality. Be a problem-solver. Hard work pays off. But most importantly, have courage, and be kind.

KATHLEEN HAUSER

Roseville Area Middle School | Roseville, MN

What are your career goals:

I teach in a Title 1 school and love it. I love the diversity of our student population and the unique culture that is created in our building. I love my job and am not dreaming of working at “the school atop the hill”. I want to continue to advocate for more band for more students – which means improving access points, making band class more diverse, and figuring out ways of making it more equitable. I think it is important that all kids get a great music education regardless of their socioeconomic status, and I’m lucky to already work in a district in which the music teachers are committed to making sure that happens.

How would your students describe you?

Demanding. But then they would tell you that they like it that way…

What do you consider your finest accomplishment and why?

Every kid who signs up for middle school band “because my mom made me” and two years later signs up for high school band “because band is my home and I love making music.” Because it means that I made a difference in those kids’ lives.
What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

The most difficult situation I’ve ever been dealt is hands down my 5th hour band this year. I’ve never had a group of higher-needs students than this particular class. They had me pulling out my hair and I felt like I was constantly running into a brick wall – a complete lack of knowledge of “how we do band” combined with low skills and lots of high needs. I had a good sub tell me he wouldn’t come back for the whole year. I had good kids trying to switch into the other hour because they didn’t want to deal with the naughty kids who were “ruining” the band. Another teacher said to me “if you can get them to sit down, be quiet, and actually play a concert, you should get teacher of the year!” It took a lot of holding my ground and not lowering my standards, a lot of meetings with parents and administrators and special education teachers, a lot of relationship building, and creative teaching to get them back on course. I was so proud of them at their winter concert; not just because we were actually able to play a concert (at one point I seriously questioned if we’d be able to do it), but because they were so well behaved while listening to their peers in orchestra and choir perform.

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SCOTT PRESCOTT

Pioneer Ridge Middle School | Chaska, MN

Describe your approach to your job.

Being a middle school band director comes at you from all different angles. The excitement comes from not knowing what crazy things might happen each day. With this in mind, I always approach with an open mind. I always approach the day knowing that one little event could send the day’s lesson plan in a completely new and unexpected direction. I always approach this job knowing that I have a rehearsal room full of developing humans. Each has their own story to tell, each has their own life trajectory, and each has special skills, talents, and abilities. It’s empowering.

How would your students describe you?

My students would describe me as a little off-kilter. I’m easily distracted by silliness. I love puns and I know my pun is successful when I hear students groan. One of the first things my 6th grade percussionists learn is how to play “ba-dump-bump.” My students would also describe me as intense when we are on a productive streak during rehearsal. I really try to encourage students to think that so much of the fun in making music comes from quality performance and the effort that is given.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

Teaching beginning band in 8 schools was a challenge. There was little or no time to become acquainted with other faculty members. I was often asked who I was subbing for...talk about being alone. The daily travel was a grind...4 schools on Monday alone. My email inbox was filled with the messages from all 8 schools. These were hurdles to overcome and student growth and accomplishment kept me motivated.
Who do you most admire in the music education field and why?

Wynton Marsalis has done an amazing job bringing music education to everyone. He is tireless in his efforts to spread the joy of music and the joy of musical knowledge and skill. I saw an interview with him and he said something that really stuck. He reminded folks that at times when you are learning to play music you will feel bad about it. “It’s okay to feel bad,” he said. I absolutely wish for my students to find joy in making and listening to music, but I also want them to recognize the reality of the musical investment. It’s not all rainbows and unicorns, but the reward is worth the effort.

PAUL DIERKHISING

Detroit Lakes Middle School | Detroit Lakes, MN

Describe your approach to your job.

I approach my job by being as prepared physically as possible, to be sincere with all the people I come in contact with and a person who is always willing to sacrifice personal time to ensure that our band program is the best it can be… I wish for them to learn many lessons about life. If I can share with our young people life skills and experiences in regards to appropriate conduct and behavior as they work with other people in all settings, then I have helped them to become responsible citizens…

Dream big – what is one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

To pin down one thing to accomplish in my job is a difficult question to answer… probably it would be to earn the respect of young people… and know I have made a positive impact in some way in their lives.

What do you consider your finest accomplishment and why?

The finest accomplishment would be the day to day routine with students and knowing that they enjoy our time together.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

To prove the value of music performance to administration to maintain the current schedule so that our students have adequate and appropriate rehearsal time every day, and to not have conflict with our concerts when some other entity schedules an event without first checking the school calendar where students overlap. With regard to scheduling, a sincere visit here and there has proven to be effective.
RYAN MEYER

Harlan Community School | Harlan, IA

Describe your approach to your job.

Every day I try to answer the question, “What’s in it for me?” for every student. I try to make my band program custom fit for every student as much as possible. Whether we are in a classroom setting, group lesson, or in a peripheral ensemble such as marching band or jazz band, I want to make that experience the best it can be for each kid by maximizing their talents and contributions to the group... I believe that if every kid feels valued and important, the question, “What’s in it for me?“ will be answered every day.

What are your career goals?

…I want students to come back and say “being in your band made me a better person” or “being in band was the best part of being in school”…

What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

My most memorable moment was walking into the band room for the first day of school at my first job. My feelings ranged from excitement all the way to terror! It was at that moment that I realized that I was on my own and that the successes and failures of the program were squarely on my shoulders.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

The biggest obstacle has been change, especially when it comes to student engagement and technology. I challenge myself on a yearly basis to try something new or use a new resource to keep kids engaged and wanting more. I have tried to make practicing in school and at home more engaging through the use of SmartMusic and creating practice and play-along tracks using programs like Audacity or apps such as IReal Pro. I keep a personal YouTube page to post videos of performances to allow kids to assess themselves. My goal is to use technology to enhance a student’s experience, but not have it drive my instruction.

ANDY SCHMIDT

Highview Middle School | New Brighton, MN

Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

The one thing I would like to accomplish is to remove all barriers to participating in music education in our school district. Starting in 4th grade, students can opt in to orchestra, 5th grade they can opt in to band and in 6th grade, students can opt in to choir. My dream is that every student opts in for music education in Mounds View Public Schools… With the cooperation of the Superintendent, Director of Curriculum and building Principals we’re making progress. Our district’s Equity Promise, which states “All students will be prepared for postsecondary success regardless of race, class or disability,” guides our work in increasing participation in music education…
How would your students describe you?

My students would describe me in a number of ways. Some flattering and some, not so much… I hope that the common theme would be that I have high expectations. I set the bar high for my students. I really believe that students will always perform to the teacher’s expectations.

What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

My most memorable moment in my career was preparing my 8th grade band to perform at the 2011 MMEA Midwinter Clinic. Two days before the performance we had a two hour evening rehearsal. The plan was to rehearse for an hour and a half and then perform the entire concert program for parents followed by an ice cream social. The students were working incredibly hard. It was just one of those rehearsals where the students were engaged, improvement was happening fast, and we were having a lot of fun getting better. I remember looking at my watch and seeing that it was already 9:00 p.m... That was when the kids and families were scheduled to go home! I told the kids what time it was and asked if they would take a five minute break before we performed for the parents. If anyone had to go, I would allow it since it was my fault we ran over time. To my surprise not a single student left. We finished the evening with our best performance of the year bonding over dilly bars and ice cream sundaes. That was a special group of kids, not because of how talented they were but because of the work ethic they brought every day. We truly had fun together rehearsing music and performing.

Who do you most admire in the music education field and why?

The people I most admire in the music education field are my past band directors. A dear colleague who tragically passed away in 2009 loved the Tennyson quote, “I am a part of all I have met.” This phrase resonates with me and my mentors, my past teachers and instructors whose teaching style, approach and philosophy live on through my teaching every day on the podium.

CHAZ NEUVIRTH

Harlan Community High School | Harlan, IA

Describe your approach to your job.

When I prepare for rehearsal I think how students can be best served and how their needs can be met. Although my profession is music education, I feel that I must serve students’ social and emotional needs as well. Primarily, I want students to be better people; we will then have a better band and a promising future society. Making a lasting impact on students is why I teach and how I approach my position.

What are your career goals?

I heard from a wise and renowned band director that “When you find good land, take time and build a castle.” I am blessed to be the band director at Harlan Community High School, which I consider very good land, comprised of fantastic students, parents, and community members. I want to build a magnificent castle where music is flourishing and the needs of students are being met to the fullest extent. With the help of my fellow band directors in Iowa and Nebraska, I continue to learn new ideas that make my students better and work to build the castle.
What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

My biggest obstacle in teaching thus far has been how to best reach every student who walks into my classroom. Every student has different needs that must be met and it seems daunting to serve all of them. However, with the help of many great band directors, I am improving my abilities to differentiate learning in the classroom to reach the top players, as well as the ones who need the most assistance. I created a new goal while going through this process and that was to build stronger relationships with students so I knew how to better meet their needs. By making this the goal, many of the needs were met with a stronger bond between myself and the students. This has also helped me realize that I can also meet the needs of students outside the field of music education and on their social and emotional levels.

RYAN ANDERSON

Dover Eyota High School | Eyota, MN

Describe your approach to your job.

I strive to give my kids the best possible education I can: delivery of good habits (musically and otherwise), modeling of respect and showing how to care for others. Musically, I aim to teach all kids to have the heart of an “all-stater”, the positive attitude of a section leader and modesty of a beginner.

Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

I would like my students to give of themselves to others. Music is a very special gift to share and I would like to see my kids build bridges with music and leave this world better than they inherited it.

What do you consider your finest accomplishment and why?

The implementation of a system of classical solos for every band student, grades 6-12. To be honest though, I have had tons of help from Lewis Larson, Paul Baumgarten, Kathy Monson and my other mentors in creating this system. The kids expect to become soloists and perform. We will have over 90% of the band perform solos for judges in the month of April. Our local Middle School (6-8) solo festival is held after MSHSL solo/ensemble contest. We hire judges, accompanists and invite parents to see their kids act professionally and perform with maturity. Because of this, our HS band (97) will have over 90 soloists at contest this year, as well as several chamber groups, jazz ensembles.

What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

I felt a big “pick me up” when we moved to a new home (within the community last summer) and we had so much help from the kids and band parents that we unloaded and unpacked the largest possible U-Haul, two other trailers, two trucks and several cars full of our belongings in just over an hour. In that time, beds were made, my children’s rooms were set up, kitchen unpacked- everything... in just over an hour. To see all those people care was very... moving!
MIKE JOOSTEN

Cameron High School | Cameron, WI

Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

I would love to see music in our schools be granted more time in the school day. Too many students are not offered music or are taken out of music classes because they are struggling in other academic classes. Music may be something that they need or the one area they are gifted. I would like to see all students have the opportunity to be in music.

What do you consider your finest accomplishment and why?

Seeing the late blooming student go from one who struggles to the kid that “gets it” makes me very happy.

What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

Dan was a severely Down Syndrome boy. His parents were awesome people who were great advocates for his social development. Dan played in the percussion section (of course). He had no musical skills, but the members of the section accepted him as one of their own. It was amazing how many of our tunes had added maraca parts when Dan was in the band. The best moment with Dan was when he graduated, and I asked him what his favorite band activity was. His reply was riding in my truck to marching band practice. Go figure!

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

Scheduling. Throughout my career scheduling has been the greatest challenge. With all the new mandates for schools, time for music classes has decreased. What has worked for me is keeping a good working relationship with my administration and teaching staff. Working together we made the best decisions for students, and kept music classes thriving. Our school has always seen the importance of music, and we are blessed with a very supportive community.

JOHN KOOPMANN

Staples-Motley Schools | Staples, MN

From the Concertmaster in his high school orchestra: Throughout my seven years under his direction, I have realized how important it is to value everyone around you. Mr. Koopmann has always stood out to me as a phenomenal educator because he treats every student that walks through his door the same. How he treats them is extraordinary. Mr. Koopmann will stop what he is doing to help you and support you. When he encourages me to push myself, I am motivated to help others do the same. Because Mr. Koopmann makes students feel as if they belong, I have a desire to do the same with those around me. John Koopmann doesn't simply wave the baton or work as a Staples Motley staff member; he changes the lives of students with every measure he conducts, and every smile he shares. I believe that Mr. Koopmann is more than deserving of the award at hand because of his unconditional passion to help students succeed, in and outside of the classroom.
Describe your approach to your job.

I would say that I spend the greatest portion of my energy connecting with my students. Since I am the only orchestra teacher in my district, I have to develop relationships with my students that will last seven years and see them through the many stages of their teenage journeys. This may involve listening to students talk about their next hair coloring appointments, giving them high-fives for passing a math test, giving them brownies at the end of class (they love this!!), taking the class snow tubing at the local ski resort, or having a get-together at my home.

What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

I have a memorable moment every year at large group contest. This is a time when all my students are focused 110% and all the investment and hard work…suddenly blooms into ten minutes of musical ecstasy. At the end when I put down my baton I feel as though I have just finished a glider ride from the top of a mountain peak. Then I look at my students with a feeling of gratitude that they have given so much to make my job the most enviable job in the world!

Who do you most admire in the music education field?

I admire the incredible elementary classroom music teachers that I have known over the years, who tirelessly expose young students to the joys of music. All secondary level choral and instrumental teachers who enjoy musical success in their programs owe a deep debt to those elementary music teachers who have unimaginable class loads, but do a great job of preparing students for their later musical experiences.

JEFF GOTTWIG

Farmington High School | Farmington, MN

Describe your approach to your job.

My approach to teaching has always involved three elements. Every day when I arrive I commit to choosing my best attitude because I set the tone of the day for my students and my colleagues (the Fish philosophy); I avoid rigidity in my teaching by following Madeline Hunter’s basic premise to monitor and adjust in everything that I do; and I have fun! By the way…the choose your attitude part doesn’t always work well!

What do you consider your finest accomplishment and why?

… As I have had many notable achievements in my career, none were more rewarding than reaching students when they needed it most; talking to a student considering suicide and helping them overcome their issues only to see them return years later with their own children in tow to thank me and tell me I saved their life by being there; helping a student navigate the ugliness of a nasty divorce and to give them the strength to keep going, helping a young lady find pride in herself when she is surrounded by racism. Those types of interactions will stay with me long after the other successes have faded.
What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

I would have to say my biggest obstacle is not singular but plural. Over my years I have had to fight the endless fight over budget cuts and administrative indifference. Our 5th grade band program seems to be on the chopping block every year. Reinstated back in 1993 it has been a constant battle with elementary school principals to keep this valuable asset from being eliminated. Twenty two years later we still have our program intact accomplished through organized campaigns to rally parent support, district surveys to gauge level of support for the program (the theme of my Masters Capstone project), calling trees, and utilizing resources outside the district (Dr. Tim, MMEA resource personnel, etc.).

Who do you most admire in the music education field and why?

After having served over 6 years in the Army as a musician I moved to Minnesota from Oregon and did my undergrad at the U of M. Frank Bencriscutto was far and away my greatest role model and mentor. Dr. Ben was the most dedicated and passionate music educator I have ever met. He had a quality about him that burst with joy for music and teaching. Although I often gave him grief for the subjects of his speeches (melting down all of the nuclear weapons to make sousaphones is a personal favorite!) he instilled in me so many of the qualities of a passionate teacher that I still use every day. He recommended me for my current position back in 1986 and when I called him to thank him I told him “I owe you one”. I’ll never forget his retort. He said “no Jeff, I owed you one”.

ZAC KONRAD

Plattsmouth High School | Plattsmouth, NE

What are your career goals?

Ultimately I want to build a program intertwined with our community in such a way that Plattsmouth, the city, becomes synonymous with band. The support in the past several years has been great and steadily improving, but there is still a ways to go. I honestly believe if you can build that community support, so many other issues we struggle with would take care of themselves.

How would your students describe you?

I have been fortunate to have some wonderful students. I try to balance being demanding with humor and, although it can result in less-than-serious tangents, it really helps build a bond in the band. Here is what one student said that I feel best answers this question, “Mr. K also chooses to show me what a good leader is each and every day by setting an example to all of his students. He teaches not only ‘band things‘ but ‘life things‘ in his classroom every day. He commands respect and all the students passing through his room will receive respect. He also goes out of his way to show us why it’s important to be involved in music. He genuinely cares about shaping quality individuals.” It is the greatest joy knowing that students have grown since being one of my students. Hearing these types of notes are a great blessing in my life.
What is the most memorable moment in your career so far?

I want to preface this by saying that I don’t intend this to be self-serving, it just sticks out the most in my mind. This past fall, we had a kitchen staff member diagnosed with a very aggressive form of cancer. Her name is Cindy and she also has a nephew, Jon, who is in the band. We had been searching for ways to support her through this challenging time and he approached me and asked if the band could make their way down to her house and surprise her with a personal performance. We were able to make this happen and it was such a humbling experience. Thinking back on this experience can still bring tears to my eyes just remembering how grateful she was… It’s very easy to get caught up in numbers and recognitions when you work with bands, but I’ve found these are the kind of experiences that teach me the most about myself.

MICHAEL PEARSON

Fridley High School | Fridley, MN

Describe why you think you were nominated for this award.

I was really touched and surprised by this nomination… When reflecting back on this question, there were a few traits that I possess that came to mind that are probably common amongst all of the candidates: passion for music, passion for teaching students, and a drive to create – not just world-class musicians – but citizens…

Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

I currently teach in a low income, urban area; I have amazing students who are passionate about music, though they cannot always afford the luxuries that other programs may take for granted (no disrespect intended). With that, given my current position, one of my big dreams is to take my students on an International tour… On a smaller, more realistic side note, I would also like to create a program to raise funds for private lesson scholarships. I have quite a few students that desire private lessons but are not able to afford them; private instruction should never be about the “Haves and Have-Not”, it should be about students wanting to improve as musicians.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

Studies now show that 50% of educators leave the profession within the first five years of teaching and to be honest, passing the five year mark was one of my biggest obstacles. No one could have prepared me for the biggest negatives that we face as teachers: feeling disrespected or unappreciated by the general public (example: during the collective bargaining and union busting dilemma in Wisconsin, I could not believe the discontent felt from the general public towards teachers), angry parents, budget cuts and finances, low pay when compared to other professions, and a workload that often exceeds (especially in terms of hours) that of other educators. These are the ugly truths of education in our society at this time; surviving them has been an accomplishment unto it’s own… During the first five years, I found the value of professional development and the need to create strong relationships with administrators. I found myself networking at MMEA and I never forgot about the big picture that I had in mind for my program. I found time to read, listen to music, and stay healthy through exercise and meditation, and, perhaps most importantly, I started playing my instrument again. I found myself needing a reminder of what I loved about making music, not just what I loved about teaching.
However, my love for teaching kept me going whenever I would find myself bitter about the public view on education. While I would read and hear terrible things from some members of the general public, my frustrations were washed away when I would be working with my bright-eyed, risk-taking, hard-working students. These small actions made a huge impact on my “survival” and without my family, my horn or the amazing relationships I have built with other colleagues, I would not have made it past the five year mark. This is a tough gig but it is the best gig going, let’s not forget this!

KEVIN KOSIAK

Perham Public Schools | Perham, MN

What do you consider your finest accomplishment and why?

Surviving my deployment to Iraq in 2007-08 with the NDARNG. I am proud of my deployment because it was hard for me at age 51 to do all the training the kids did. Stretched me. I hope made me more appreciative of all (we) have here in the good 'ol USA.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

Never feeling like I was quite smart enough. I overcame it, I think, by working as hard as I can and not being afraid to be honest about my gifts and talents and weaknesses. Not shunning the weakness, but constantly working on those to improve.

Who do you most admire in the music education field and why?

My 7th grade band director at Jordan Junior High in North Minneapolis. Warren Alm was a great musician and always made us feel welcome when we came down to the band room. He was always glad to see us. We had a lot of fun. He had very high musical standards and we took it seriously. Great lesson for a 7th grader to learn…

CURTIS FORSCH

York Public Schools | York, NE

Describe your approach to your job.

I think that all band students should have the opportunity to participate in all facets of the band program. I work to provide opportunities for them in concert, marching, pep, and jazz bands as well as solo, small ensemble and percussion ensemble performances and contests. It can make for a hectic schedule at times, especially being the only band instructor in our school system. If my students want to continue on in college with band, I want them to have had the experiences to start them on their way…
What are your career goals?

I have completed an Educational Specialist Degree from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln with an emphasis in being a music supervisor. I definitely want to continue working with band students, but I am also interested in helping new teachers find as much success as possible as they begin their careers.

How would your students describe you?

Dedicated and supportive…My students know that I am willing to put in whatever time is necessary—before or after school, weekends, anytime to help them achieve their musical goals. They know that I care about their progress and want to see them succeed.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

Our school district went through a very difficult financial crisis, losing 4 fine-arts staff members (including one band director). The band budget was also cut by 75 percent. I refused to reduce the opportunities available for our students, so I spent and continue to spend many extra hours meeting their needs. I’ve encouraged our band booster organization to increase their fund raising efforts to help maintain and provide instruments for the band program. Everyone has had to work together to provide for our students.

DALE NELSON

Hills-Beaver Creek Public Schools | Beaver Creek, MN

Dream big – what is the one thing that you would like to accomplish in your current job?

I have already achieved more than I originally hoped for when I began to teach in this small school in southwest Minnesota. I took over a program that had a total number of band members in grades 5-12 of less than forty. The high school band had not received a superior rating at state large group contest in 36 years and generally had the lowest combined score of all participating bands in our region. We now have 114 band members in a school that has just over 300 students in grades k-12. We have also received 8 consecutive superior ratings at large group contest and have finished as one of the top 2 high scoring bands 7 times. Our school also had the first Minnesota All-State band member selected in 40 years with several more who will attain this goal in the near future.

What has been your biggest obstacle in your teaching career and how did you overcome it?

The biggest obstacle I have had to deal with in my career has come in the past several years with students being so involved in so many activities that they have been unable or unwilling to commit any time to home practice. The way that I have been able to deal with this lack of practice is to use 50% of our daily band rehearsal to work on basic music skills. We practice scales, intervals, lip slurs, range studies, rudiments, tone production and most importantly intonation to the degree that our 6th graders are able to tune each other correctly by listening to the waves created when playing out of tune.