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Community band still making music after nine years

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By Matt DeReno

Nine years ago, former North Hills High School music teacher Warren Mercer set out to organize a community band.

He reserved space at a local social hall, but that proved to be a mistake. Eighty musicians showed up on a cold November day, far too many for the small room.

"I was simply trying to think of some way to stay busy after I retired," said Mercer, who taught for 31 years. "I didn't realize so many would be interested."

Not all 80 stuck with it, but the North Suburban Symphonic Band is going strong with about 45 musicians.

The band will usher in its 10th anniversary season with a tribute concert on Sunday -- Veterans Day -- at Ross Elementary School. The 7:30 p.m. concert will pay homage to those who serve in government and the armed forces.

The anniversary season is a milestone for a community volunteer band, Mercer said.

"Many similar bands start off strong but do not last. That has not happened here," he said. "I expect the band will continue to be viable for years to come."

If so, it will probably be due to the efforts of band members such as Kathy Wikowski. Wikowski, who plays the French horn, started studying under Mercer in fifth grade and continued until she graduated from North Hills in 1972.

She described Mercer as "a very challenging teacher and a great musician."

"He was a reason why I joined the band. ... It allowed me to continue learning the French horn as well. He had a knack for picking challenging music," she said.


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Wikowski is one of a handful of members who have been with the band since it began in 1992. Starting out as the band's board secretary, she is now its president.

Wikowski is not one to blow her own horn -- unless it's made of brass, of course -- and shares credit for the band's success.

"It takes everyone involved to keep this thing going," she said. "The band is a great secret of the North Hills, and we need to get the word out to continue the good things we have done."

Those things include personally inviting members of local Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts to attend the concert on Sunday at a reduced cost.

Those who attend will probably be invited to take part in one of Wikowski's favorite numbers: a sing-along, with veterans of each branch of the armed forces standing to sing as that branch's anthem is played.

Wikowski's ability to evolve has helped the band stay together. With the help of a computer-proficient colleague, she launched a Web site for the band at trfn.clpgh.org/nssb/

That effort and others, she hopes, will draw in younger members.

"It is very important to keep younger people involved," she said. "To do so, we need to speak their language, and today, that language is the computer."

According to Wikowski, since the Web site started, it has gotten more than 2,000 hits. Several new members discovered the band through the site, she said.

Mercer, who will serve as guest conductor on Sunday, retired as active director in 1995. The position was filled by Edwin P. Arnold, chairman of Grove City College's music department.

When Arnold stepped down, Erich Lascek stepped up. Lascek has been with the band for only a couple of years but expects to direct its members long into the future.

Lascek discovered the band while recruiting musicians for a University of Pittsburgh-sponsored musical he was directing. A friend gave him the names of musicians in the band.

Eventually, he began playing with the band and took the job of music director -- the band's only paid position -- when it opened. Lascek's regular job is as choir director at Gateway High School in Monroeville.

Among many things that drew Lascek to the position was the age range of band members.

"It is interesting to see band members -- some as young as 15, others close to 80 -- work with each other," he said. "I can't think of any other community activity capable of bridging such wide generation gaps."

A number of members joined in high school and then returned after college.

Mark Shearer, a former North Catholic High School student and saxophone player, is one such member. He played for the community band his last two years of high school, then went to Gannon University in Erie. He's now a student at Pitt.

When he got back to Pittsburgh, he got a letter from the band inviting him back.

"I was glad I did," he said. "Going back has given me the opportunity to continue to play for people I know. It's a passion on the side. I plan to stay as long as I possibly can."

The significance of the Veterans Day concert in light of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks is not lost on Shearer.

I think it's going to be good for the audience," Shearer said. "I can't do anything for the country, but to be able to provide some kind of entertainment to people that may have lost something is good."

Kelly Roofner, a '97 North Allegheny School District graduate, played in the community band during high school, then left to pursue a music degree at Indiana University.

"I knew since high school I wanted to major in music, but I decided to switch gears in college," said Roofner, now studying video production at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh.

"I still like to have an outlet for music. It is great to have a place to play. Not that many outlets [exist] for people to get together outside of the band. ... Down the line, who knows? If I decide to pursue music professionally, it is a great way to maintain my skills and be part of an ensemble. It keeps my skills sharp."

Meanwhile, Wikowski has plans to ensure the community band is around for its 20th anniversary.

"Our goal is to get bigger and better," she said. "We have seen an influx of new members. Everyone who comes in is thrilled to find a place to use his or her talent. That is what we are all about."

Matt DeReno is a free-lance writer.



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