



Good Friends, Good Times

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■ “We play wrong notes, go out of tune, get caught tapping our feet off the beat—and we love every moment of it!” exclaims Kathleen Marsen, 53, an amateur flute player and general manager of the Plainville Wind Ensemble of Plainville, Connecticut, which has been growing in numbers and confidence since 1987.

Sure, says Marsen, the ultimate goal of a community band is to entertain appreciative audiences. But there’s more to it than that.

There’s the pride and camaraderie that playing instills in the musicians, for one. As Marsen puts it, “Working toward a concert, putting on formal dress, the thrill of performing, and taking pride in playing well as a team is why the ensemble has a great future!”

Rejuvenating Music

Marsen hails the physical benefits of her hobby as well. “Good posture, essential to playing a wind instrument, strengthens your back, arm, and facial muscles,” she explains. “With better posture, breathing improves, and there is an increase of oxygen throughout the body.”

How does Marsen know all this? She’s a nurse, with years of experience in intensive care, cardiac rehabilitation, and as a school nurse at Hatton Elementary School in Southington, Connecticut. “Almost every medical article on aging heralds the need to be proactive with one’s mental and physical health,” she observes, adding, “Playing music is rejuvenating.”

But nursing is a busy profession, and for years her commitment to career and children meant this enthusiastic former high school band member lost touch with ensemble performance. Marsen’s flute stayed with her, though, helping her through some grueling days: “Many evenings colleagues could hear me playing Irish tunes, or, if I was annoyed, a run of scales,” she recalls.

Then in 1987, Marsen read in the local newspaper that the wind ensemble was looking for members, and she jumped at the chance. “I couldn’t get to rehearsal fast enough!” she laughs. In the auditorium of Plainville Middle School, she found 14 other amateur musicians of all ages raring to go.

Binging Up Band

One of those 14 was saxophonist and clarinetist Bob Blankenburg, a former Navy musician who last played his horn

in 1952. "We started with only a few musicians, mostly high school seniors or graduates," remembers Blankenburg, now 76 and a retired computer manager. "There was turnover and for a while we stagnated, but that changed when our current director joined."

The director is Rick Lawrence, a dedicated and experienced community band leader. "I've found my niche directing community bands," he explains. "The variety of musicianship, personalities, and general enthusiasm is what drew me."

"Although it's hard to bring up a band!" Lawrence continues, explaining that the quirks and quibbles of this extended family keep him on his toes. "I never know what's going to happen. There's jokes, tom-foolery, and grumbling, along with remarkable playing."

Lawrence has directed academic bands, where deadlines must be met and where there is more stress, "but we are volunteers, here for recreation, so there is little pressure on any one person."

A little pressure isn't a bad thing, counters Blankenburg. "Rick gives us solo parts, which we perform in front of the group. I notice that when we perform like this, we get better and more confident."

"I've stayed with this ensemble because it offers both jazz and concert music," adds Blankenburg, who also has joined Plainville's new jazz ensemble. "It's playing concert music where one learns to read well and develop a good and rich tone."

There can be frustration, observes Lawrence. "I'm often challenged with incorrect embouchures, getting people to stop being rooted to sheet music," he notes. "My biggest quest is to stop foot-tapping—keeping the beat is my job!"

But he's happy to pass on what he knows about posture, dynamics, and music history. In fact, Lawrence calls the Plainville ensemble "perfect for me." "The musicians are willing to try new ideas, they give their best, and they encourage me to improve my directing skills."

Remarkable Sound

Under Lawrence's leadership, the ensemble has grown in size and ambition. It now boasts 58 members, with musicians ranging in age from 21 to 96. A fully-fledged member of the Plainville community, in October it plays a benefit for the local Marines Center's Toys for Tots program. Its reputation is growing too—the guest conductor for the benefit will be Keith Brion of The New Sousa Band from New Haven, Connecticut.

Like Blankenburg, flute player Sue Yawgel, 45, points to Lawrence as one reason why the ensemble flourishes. "He has a way of changing our perception so that we view music differently," she says. "This allows us to broaden our understanding and focus on detail, which results in a remarkable sound and performance."

When Yawgel, a credentialing manager for Aetna insurance, saw the ensemble's newspaper ad in 1987, it was enough to spark an old flame.

"My flute came out of the closet, practice began again, and it was time to buy to an intermediate flute," says Yawgel, who began playing in fourth grade. At times, she says, "sabbaticals" from flute playing have been necessary—once during college and once, after playing in the ensemble for a few years, when family commitments took over.

"After my second sabbatical, I rejoined the ensemble, purchased my first professional flute, and since then have felt a sense of belonging and commitment that I am very proud of," Yawgel says. "The ensemble has become my second family. Good friends, good times—this band brings that to life!"

There's much about ensemble playing that has helped Yawgel's musical growth. For instance, Lawrence chooses difficult pieces she wouldn't typically play. "And focusing on dynamics and band etiquette is a challenge if you're not used to it," she adds. "Plus, I enjoy taking on different sections, the third part instead of the first. I love the low notes!"

Incredible Feeling

Dave Sweatt really loves the low notes. The 34-year-old property manager has been playing tuba for six years and now plays in seven bands, including Plainville.

"I also sub for any band that needs a tuba," says Sweatt, pointing out that unbalanced sections—too many trumpets, not enough low brass—is another challenge that band directors face. "There also can be less experienced sections, intonation problems, and the occasional personal disagreement. But everything Rick asks of this band, it responds to."

Sweatt enjoys playing tuba because it helps his chronic asthma by keeping his lungs clear, and he finds great satisfaction playing for an audience: "When an audience listens and applauds, it gives you an incredible warm feeling."

But beyond those benefits, Sweatt enjoys the social side of the ensemble, meeting his bandmates at rehearsal and sharing in everyone's success. In fact, what Sweatt says about this ensemble of friends gives another clue to why it can look forward to a long and happy future.

"Plainville is the most sociable band I've played with," Sweatt observes. "It's an extended family. You meet people from different lifestyles and occupations, which I find fascinating. The age variety is something—how many organizations are there where you find retirees and youngsters together in a group?"