

Features

Cumpston's life, death leaves lasting impact

ALISON FIELDHOUSE

In a devastating blow to the West Linn family, Jeff Cumpston, former band director, was killed by a motorcyclist while riding his bicycle on Aug. 9 in Zimbabwe.

"When I received the call letting me know about the accident this summer, every happy memory from the one year I learned from him seemed to only bring more pain, but as time progresses, I can't help but feel so, so grateful for all the wonderful experiences I collected as a result of his guidance," Georgia Muggli, junior, said.

In the summer of 2008, Cumpston and his family moved to Zimbabwe to teach instrumental and voice lessons at the Harare International School. He and his wife, Theresa, decided with their two children, Mary, now 12, and Bryce, now 9, that they wanted to experience a new culture.

On the Cumpstons' blog, he wrote in his last entry, "Well, here we are, back in Africa. We had such a wonderful time in Oregon and it all seems like a dream now. Still, it does feel good to be here; the yard looks great and we're seeing our friends from school here and there. The weather is perfect during the day (75 degrees) but really cold at night and early morning (40-ish degrees). We sleep in wool sox, hats, sweaters and use our sleeping bags as quilts on top of our beds. Brrr!!!"

Friends and family followed Cumpston's adventures in Zimbabwe including the challenges of travel, being without the internet for almost nine weeks and a car accident in which he broke his collarbone.

"If his students felt like they were losing him then, it was nothing compared to what we have lost now," Muggli said.

An impromptu candlelight vigil was held on Aug. 9 at the Cumpston family's house in West Linn. Over 200 students, friends, neighbors and others

gathered there to honor his memory.

"I don't know about other students, but I know he inspired me," Sarani Chatterjee, junior, said. "Freshman year in orchestra was one of the best years of my life. We played so much amazing music. It made me appreciate and love classical music more."

Many people spoke about their own personal experience with Cumpston. A standing room only celebration of life was also held on Aug. 30 at the Willamette Christian Church.

"He gave so much more of himself than anyone would have ever asked, and in both life and death, changed people's lives for the better, forever," Muggli said.

Cumpston taught at WLHS for 12 years, and guided the musical genius of students such as Class of 2008 graduates Kate Davis and Hailey Niswanger. According to former students, it was not only stand-out musicians he cared about. He wanted every student who crossed paths with him to take something positive from the experience.

"Jeff would want to be remembered as a good man: by his children, as a loving father who only wanted the best for them and valued his relationship with them; by his students as a mentor who taught them to appreciate and love music; and by his family and friends as someone who loved them and always tried to stay connected and involved in their lives," Theresa said. "Jeff would never have considered himself to be a saint, but he definitely was a man who cared about others, about his music and about God."

Cumpston helped many students find success outside of the school program lining up instruments and lessons for those in need, gigs with professionals, and scholarships to music programs. For instance, Niswanger, received a scholarship to Berklee School of Music in Boston, Mass. She played first alto saxophone in the 2008 Grammy Band as well

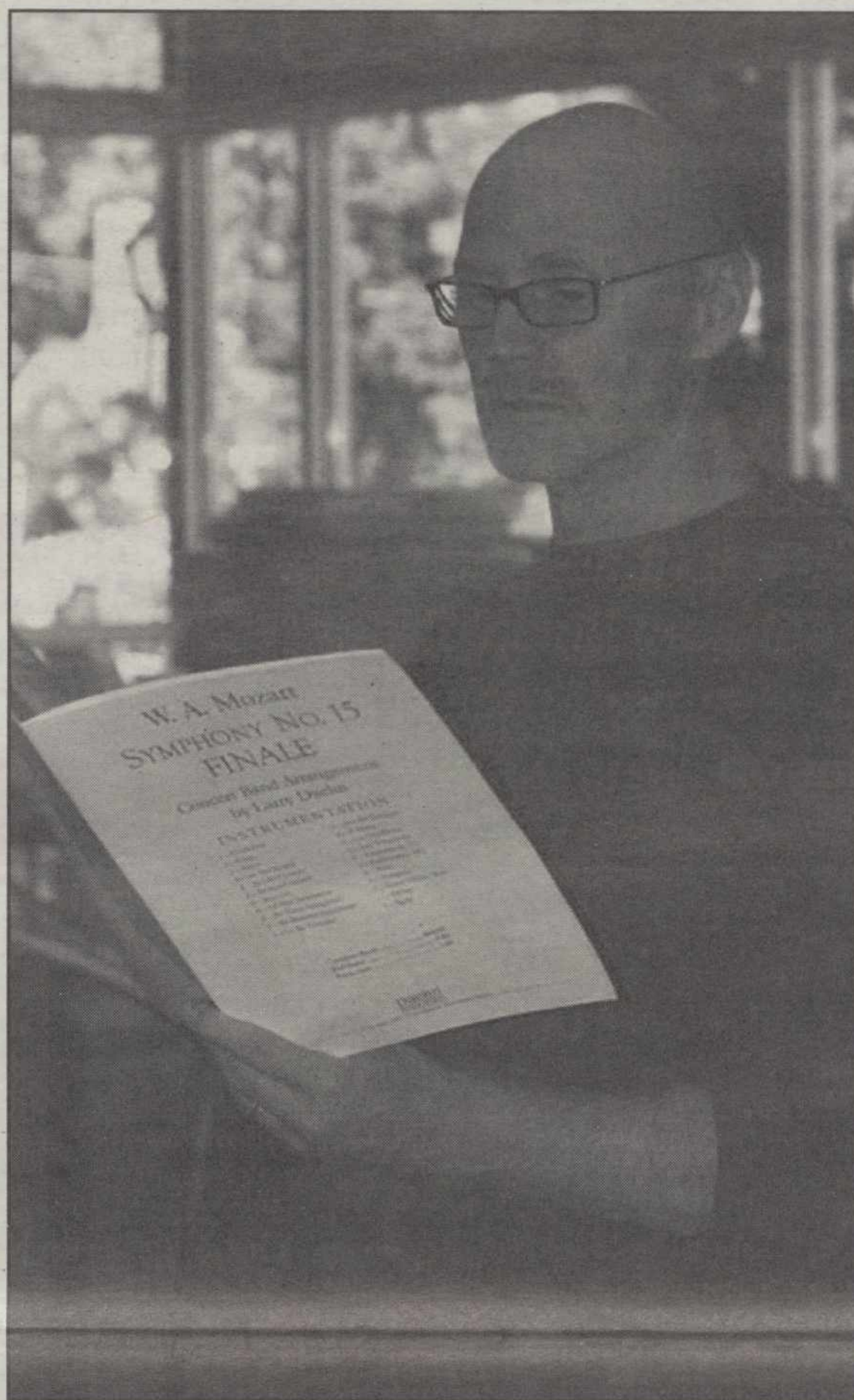


Photo by Jon Helmkamp, Class of 2008
Jeff Cumpston, former WLHS band director, conducts musicians during a rehearsal. He and his family moved to Zimbabwe where he was killed on Aug. 9 while riding his bicycle.

as playing at other venues.

Michael Biancardi, senior, who played second alto in the WLHS Jazz Band with Niswanger remembers Cumpston fondly.

"For the two years before he left, we would have our annual gig at Jimmy Mak's, downtown. He would always give me a ride home afterward, and we would just talk about life, and whatever was going on," Biancardi said. "He was always interested in what I was doing, and really cared. He was very genuine."

Music brought many different characters together, and it was that bond over a shared passion that made Cumpston so memorable. He encouraged his students to continue on their own

personal journey in music and rendered a guiding hand in leading students down the path they wanted to take with music. He was unselfish when it came to music and he challenged his students to be the best they could be.

"Cumpston gave me the gift of music. I don't think it's something everyone can understand in our z100 society, but to those who know it, it's beyond a hobby or a chore or even a real interest," Muggli said. "Music is a shared passion between this select group of people; it's something that feeds our souls and makes every day another gift, and I owe almost everything to Mr. Cumpston."

Not only will his students

miss him but so will the adults that he connected with. He left a just as memorable impression on his fellow staff members, parents and other jazz musicians.

"Jeff could make connections with anyone; he made everyone feel comfortable and welcome. He was passionate about both music and kids," Barb Murray, English teacher, and long time friend of Cumpston's, said. "Music lived in him, and he loved teaching kids what music could be in their life. It's rare to find both in a teacher."

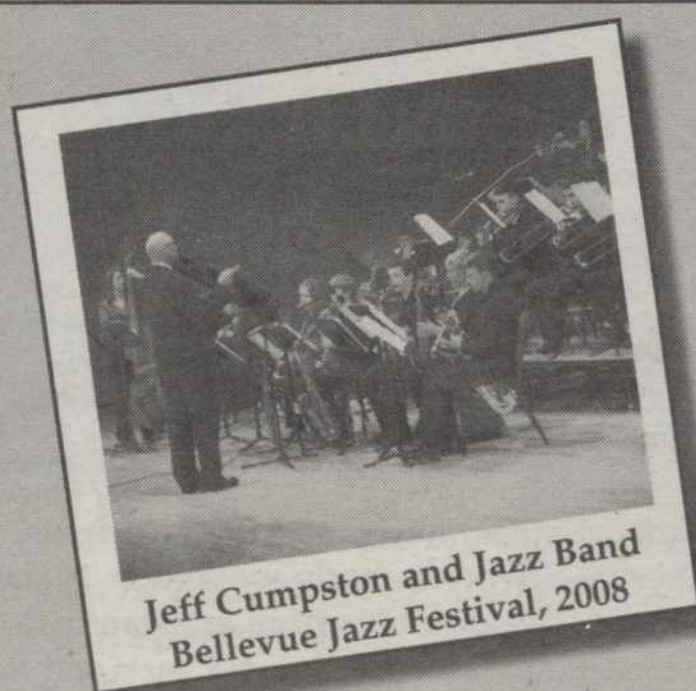
Diane Gauthier, art teacher, spent her first four years teaching in the same department as Cumpston as well. Though their paths rarely crossed on a day-to-day basis, she enjoyed his wit at the monthly fine arts meetings. "He brought compassion, understanding, wisdom, humor, love and passionate musicianship to my life. I will miss him," she said.

Cumpston's wife and children made the decision to remain in Zimbabwe to finish out the school year where Theresa is also a teacher. She said that they have many friends and excellent support there but that it would be very hard to be there or anywhere without him.

During the Cumpston's four week vacation to Oregon in June and July, he played with Niswanger to raise \$1,000 for Chombo, a nearby village in Zimbabwe that the family adopted. They continue to provide food to the village and hope to fund the drilling of a borehole to supply the villagers with water during the dry season.

For more information or to donate to the village, contact Cumpston's mother, Patricia Cook, at 503-646-2905. Checks can be made out to Patricia Cook and mailed to 8640 SW Pacer Drive, Beaverton, OR, 97008.

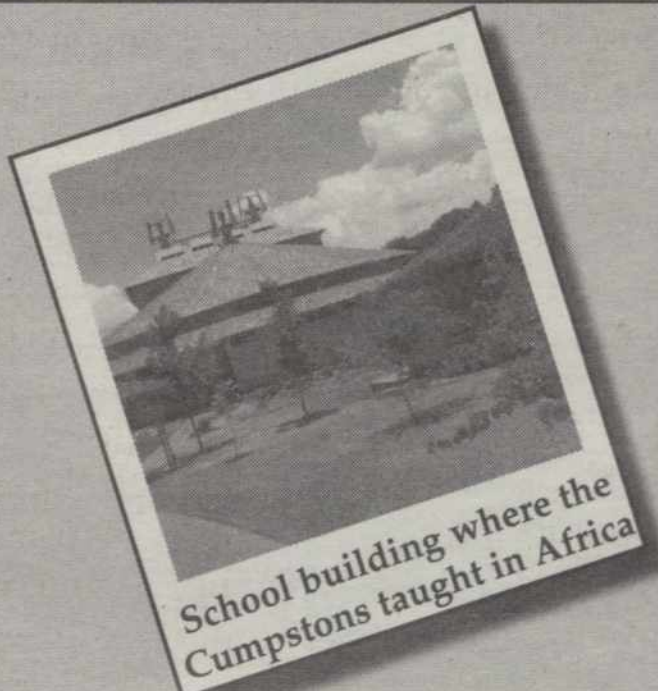
Donations can also be made to the Cumpston Family Fund at any Bank of America branch.



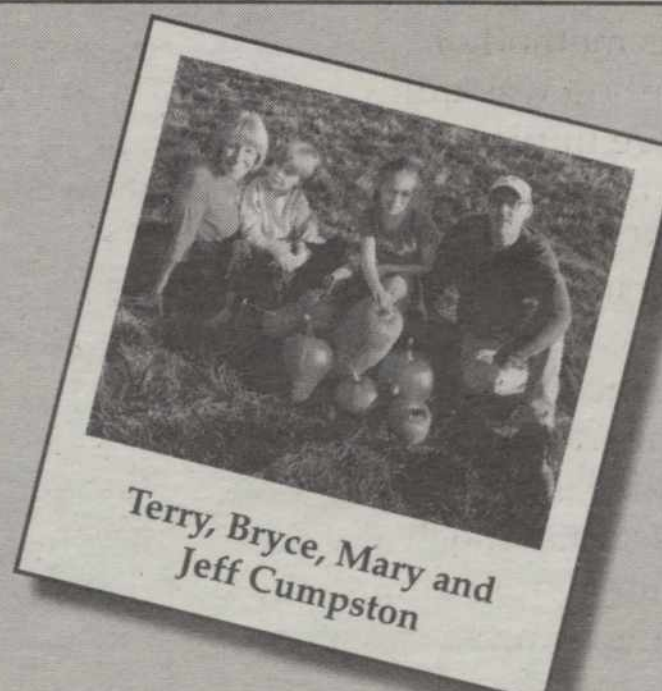
Jeff Cumpston and Jazz Band
Bellevue Jazz Festival, 2008



The teacher lounge at
Harare International
School



School building where the
Cumpstons taught in Africa



Terry, Bryce, Mary and
Jeff Cumpston