

Local musician hangs up teaching hat for exciting new adventure

BY MIKELL NIELSEN

Passionately and enthusiastically beginning an exciting and unexpected new adventure, longtime bluegrass musician and teacher Warren Whistler, 62, closes a chapter of his life as he retires from teaching at Applegate-area schools.

A Grants Pass resident, Warren's romance with music began in southern California. As a little boy, he had dreams of becoming a baseball player or surfer. But his father, a classical pianist and aerospace engineer, introduced him to "good music," and ignited Warren's desire to be a musician by going to clubs and being involved in the music scene. Warren's fondest memories of his father are listening to classical music together, which "... was the connection between us."

In high school Warren had "...a lot of high-quality blues musician friends. We'd go to Hollywood to see The Birds and Creedence Clearwater." Warren noticed that his harmonica-playing friend was getting a lot of dates with girls. Thinking this might work for him, he picked up the same instrument. However, it was in college that another friend of Warren's changed his life by teaching him to play his very first song, "Soldier's Joy," on the guitar. Officially, Warren studied guitar at the side of John Knowles, who was the right-hand man of Chet Atkins, and violin with Maurice Borch, a seasoned New York violinist. That was when the violin became Warren's lifelong passion and led him to teaching and playing in the Grants Pass-

area bluegrass bands Sequoia and Willy and the Poor Boys.

Warren was heavily influenced by all the masters of traditional blues like Doc Watson, David Grisman, and Vassar Clements. He also loves musicians such as James Taylor, Marc Cohn, and Bruce Hornsby because they "turn on an emotional switch." But his favorite musicians of all time are his friends.

A music teacher for the past 35 years, Warren has instructed students at Rogue Community College and local middle and high schools. For the past 12 years he has taught strings at Williams Elementary and Applegate schools. What he loves most about teaching is the "...widespread appreciation of variety. I like the wise guys, the quiet ones, the underachievers, the overachievers. Teaching them is hard. Loving them is easy."

Some of Warren's former students have gone on to play professionally in southern Oregon, including Joe Ginnet and Ryan Redding of the Grants Pass-area band "State of Jefferson," and Chris Greys of the band "Colonel Mustard."

During Warren's first year of teaching at Williams Elementary School he instructed then nine-year-old twins Justen and Jorden Nielsen. Their experience with Warren was life-changing as he instilled in the brothers a lifelong passion for music. Justen, who also plays the guitar, is currently drumming for the Los Angeles band, "The Dark," which just released

its first music video. Warren cultivated a love for the guitar in Jorden, who continued with lessons and played in high school and college bands, and who still plays today. Jorden says, "Playing the guitar helped me catch the eye (and ears) of my wife."

Recently, Warren announced his decision to retire from teaching and says retirement affords him the "freedom to follow my own motivation as opposed to motivating others." And that's exactly what he is doing.

Like some kind of perfect serendipity, Warren has found himself part of a musical group of "amazing bluegrass artists" who share the same "Three Musketeers" mentality, "All for one and one for all." This new group is called "The Antonucci Collective."

Longtime friend and musician Gary Antonucci introduced Warren to a demo of original songs by Gary and his son, Coleman, and asked Warren to play along. When Warren picked up his violin he felt "an instant emotional connection" to the music. Singer-songwriter Coleman Antonucci, a 25-year-old man who has suffered from health issues and emotional struggles, was writing "everyman songs [about] yearning, searching for love, doing the best one can...very uplifting," said Warren.

The "heartfelt singing and beautiful harmonies" touched every musician who heard the father-and-son duo, and "...a band came together quickly" and started recording songs. Warren shared that the process has been organic and magical. He has listened to these songs hundreds of times and still gets a tear in his eye. The songs "get beyond analytical and more into the heart."

Warren said this experience is "the highlight of my career." He explained that it takes a long time to know how you feel about things and to be true to one's self because there are influences and paths that lead to nowhere, but "Lucidity and clarity and continuity are signs of truth. If you need a dictionary to figure out what you're saying, or ask directions where to go, it



After teaching strings at Williams and Applegate Schools for 12 years, Warren Whistler will retire at the end of the school year and focus on his new band, The Antonucci Collective. Their first CD is due out this summer. Photo: Mikell Nielsen

just doesn't ring true." Warren has found his truth with The Antonucci Collective.

He described this recording project as "a return to the joyousness of making music on a real and pure level. It's just magic." Warren added, "It's a gift. A kind of validation. Your insides just get a big sigh. You start sleeping like a baby and feeling like life is good. You don't think about the struggles of life. You lose ego. To me, that is the road to happiness."

It appears that the future holds even more magic for Warren as he will be involved in more recording projects and intends to "play a lot of happy music." Music gives Warren a sense of identity. He enjoys the process of being part of a team and said, "It's kind of a spiritual deal."

As Warren leaves the world of teaching behind, he is deeply appreciative of his friend and assistant of 10 years, Alison Huber, who is taking the lead as music teacher at Williams Elementary and Applegate schools. "She is very cooperative and fun-loving."

Warren's advice to young musicians: "Enjoy it on whatever level you find it. In other words, accept your gifts, accept your limitations. Find joy in it."

Currently Warren and The Antonucci Collective are in the final production stages of their CD with Bob Pagano of Mountain View Studios in Wilderville; the CD is scheduled for release this summer. For more information and to find out when and where you can obtain the CD, contact Warren at 541-479-3785.

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Open letter to Warren from Stephanie

Warren,

Thank you for giving the gift of music to the students of Williams and Applegate Schools over the past 12 years. You have touched the lives of hundreds of kids, inspired many to try new things, encouraged them to take risks, and always made sure each had their moment to shine. Not only did you enrich the lives of so many children, your concerts warmed the hearts of countless parents and community members year after year. Your positive spirit will be missed by all. Thank you for reminding us what



is possible and for always believing in our kids.

Stephanie Allen-Hart
Former Principal
Williams and Applegate Schools