

## The Music Teacher

### Nita Van Pelt Lives and Breathes Her Music

by Laura McAdams of the Lake Oswego Review (reprinted with permission)

To Nita Van Pelt, music is a lifelong skill that, despite the challenges, yields great rewards.

"Kids that play music are able to express emotions that can't be described with words," said Van Pelt.

She knows that music can be an outlet that is sometimes needed for kids who are going through the turbulence of growing up. And it is with this knowledge that she is able to make a difference in the lives of her students.

Van Pelt began her education in music in fourth grade on clarinet with the public school music program in Beaverton. She didn't always want to earn her degree in music; she had always dreamed of becoming a math teacher, that is, until she took trigonometry. Having won many solo competitions on the clarinet, Van Pelt decided to make her passion her profession and teach music.

She was accepted at the prestigious Oberlin Conservatory of Music as one of three clarinetists. At Oberlin, one of her professors insisted that she take at least one string class — just in case. Little did she know that she would need that knowledge about stringed instruments when she would become the main orchestra director of the entire Lake Oswego School District Orchestra Program.

After teaching band for three years in Ohio, Van Pelt returned to Oregon in search of a job. She took up teaching band and string classes at Waluga Junior High School.

For 17 years, Van Pelt has led the Lake Oswego School District Orchestra Program, leading Lake Oswego's young string players to success.

Seventeen years ago when Van Pelt first came to Lake Oswego, she taught a couple of small classes, some attended by only five kids. The string players from Lakeridge and Lake Oswego high schools were combined into one district high school orchestra because of limited interest; less than 20 kids were signed up for orchestra.

Today, the orchestra program now teaches music to students from every school in the district. Since starting the program, Van Pelt helped the string program grow to more than 200 kids



Nita Van Pelt (photo by Vern Uyetake of the Lake Oswego Review)

with the support of Sandra Nelson at the central office and the music coordinator, Debbie Glaze.

Many students make their start on a stringed instrument beginning in the fourth grade. Under the direction of Brenda Liu and Cynthia Scott, young musicians learn the basics of their instrument starting from how to open the case, to placing the fingers on the fingerboard. With the help of Kathy Reed, Van Pelt, at 7:30 a.m. teaches 90 elementary students who have completed the beginner's class.

Griffin Gaffney, a sixth-grader at Uplands Elementary School who started the violin with the Lake Oswego beginning strings, says that he doesn't know how Van Pelt is able to manage the whole orchestra like she does.

"I hope the orchestra program stays even with the budget cuts because I learn a lot from Ms. Van Pelt. I have fun with my instrument and I get to meet a lot of kids from other schools."

After her morning session with the younger students, Van Pelt moves on to the junior high schools, where she teaches around 30 seventh and eighth graders at both Waluga and Lake Oswego Junior High School.

"All the kids like Ms. Van Pelt. She picks out good fun music that she knows we will like to play and she is

very encouraging. I definitely plan on continuing orchestra with Ms. Van Pelt into high school," said Stephanie Higgins, who also started playing the violin in fourth grade.

One of the greatest accomplishments Van Pelt feels she has achieved with the Lake Oswego strings is the fact that she was able to boost the interest for stringed instruments at the high school level enough so that the orchestra didn't have to be combined. Not only do LOHS and Lakeridge have their own orchestras, but they have also both reached an accomplished level. Both qualified for state last year, and both placed near the top of the state's high school orchestras.

"Ms. Van Pelt has given me the opportunity to take a leadership role in orchestra," says Jerry Lin, a senior violinist at Lakeridge who helped lead the orchestra to state last year. "It is great that this program is able to recognize music, not just placing all the emphasis on sports."

Nicole Merzel, a junior who plays the violin at Lakeridge, likes having Van Pelt as a teacher.

"It is easy to have a personal relationship with her. Unlike other teachers, Ms. Van Pelt takes the time to get to know you."

Van Pelt is also very patient. The logistics of her job are imaginably difficult. She teaches five different orchestras in five different buildings spread out across Lake Oswego. As a result, there is no permanent place for her to store the variety of materials needed for class, and she ends up spending a considerable amount of time in her car.

Despite the challenges of her job, Van Pelt says she wouldn't want to do anything else.

"(The greatest reward) is being able to start a child on their instrument and watch them grow through junior high, and finally into high school. The ultimate reward is to be able to play pieces with students after they've become accomplished musicians on the instrument on which you started them on."

Aside from teaching virtually all of Lake Oswego's string players, Van Pelt teaches the Interlude group (formally known as the Preparatory Orchestra) of the Metropolitan Youth Symphony. Interlude is a full orchestra with 110 students playing different instruments in the string, wind, brass or percussion family. Not only has she accomplished so much for the string players of Lake Oswego, but Van Pelt founded and organizes the All-State Middle School Orchestra. Band and choir groups had already existed, and Van Pelt wanted the middle school string players of Oregon to have the experience of participating in an All-State orchestra.

To those who are thinking about starting a stringed instrument or are having difficulties with their instrument, Van Pelt gives this advice: "Music skills are not mastered overnight. Eventually, after putting in some effort, something will click and you'll become an independent musician able to play more difficult, fun music. Music is a lifelong skill that you'll be able to use in many different ensembles, providing a lot of different opportunities you might not have been able to experience otherwise."

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