

Former Bulldogs open Desert Arts season with classical performance

By **TAMMY MALGESINI**
Community Editor

Described as exceptionally talented musicians, a pair of Hermiston High School graduates will take the stage during the first concert of the Desert Arts Council 2016-17 season.

Kelly Kuo (piano) and Ron Blessinger (violin) are featured during "Evening with the Classics." A homecoming for the duo, the former Bulldogs have a surprise for the show's encore.

The performance is at 7 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 10, in the Hermiston High School auditorium, 600 S. First St. Advanced tickets are \$20 for adults or \$10 for students. Tickets purchased at the door are an additional \$5. While in town, Kuo and Blessinger will return to their alma mater to teach master classes.

Blessinger, who studied at the New England Conservatory of Music, is the artistic director for Third Angle New Music in Portland and also performs with the Oregon Symphony.

The 1983 Hermiston graduate was wildly applauded while performing as a guest violinist during a 2004 Oregon East Symphony performance in Pendleton. It has been more than a decade since Blessinger performed in the area.

Kuo, artistic director for the Oregon Mozart Players and music director/conduc-

tor of the Butler Opera Center in Austin, Texas, attended the Manhattan School of Music.

While in college, as winner of the Oregon East Symphony's Concerto Competition, Kuo performed in Pendleton. However, he hasn't taken the stage in Hermiston since graduating in 1990.

"It was a special community and it still is," Blessinger said about Hermiston. "It's very meaningful to be able to play there. It formed who I am."

"It is almost surreal to be returning to the city which nurtured my musical interests and planted the seeds which allowed me to pursue a career in this challenging field," Kuo added.

While Blessinger and Kuo are connected in several ways — Blessinger's mom was Kuo's first piano teacher and Blessinger, himself, instructed Kuo on violin — they have never taken the stage together. Although, Kuo said they did participate in Suzuki violin recitals in the Blessinger's living room. Blessinger is looking forward to playing with his former student.

"Kelly has really made a career for himself as a conductor," Blessinger said. "He's had tremendous success."

Both men have expressed appreciation for former

teachers, private music instructors and their parents' support in fostering their interest in music. While in high school, Blessinger's parents took him to Pullman, Washington, for lessons. The Kuos traveled to Portland for their son's individual lessons. Kuo said he and his brother often would start practicing inside the van during the trips — Kelly on clarinet and Calvin on trombone.

"This is so above and beyond the call of duty," Kuo said in a 2010 *East Oregonian* interview. "It's almost ridiculous how dedicated they were ... they encouraged us to excel at whatever we were doing."

In addition, Kuo gave credit to Mark Lane and Ric Sherman, former Hermiston schools teachers who developed band programs to spark interest in young musicians.

Kuo and Blessinger said programs in Pendleton, Walla Walla and the Tri-Cities provided a chance to hear the music of classical composers and opportunities to perform as soloists in competitions.

Individual and season tickets are available at the Hermiston Chamber of Commerce, Hermiston Parks & Recreation and www.desertartscouncil.com. For more information, call Larry Fetter at 541-667-5007 or Phyllis Shovelski at 541-379-6992.

Authentic village offers 'Journey to Bethlehem'

By **TAMMY MALGESINI**
Community Editor

An interactive tour set in an outdoor village shares the Biblical story of Jesus' birth during a free event this weekend in Hermiston.

Journey to Bethlehem features the sights, sounds and smells of what life may have been like 2,000 years ago in the village. Jo Ann Rincker, a member of the Hermiston Seventh-day Adventist Church, has been involved with the production since its inception in 2008.

"To me, this is the real meaning of Christmas," she said. "There are some people out there who have never heard the story, so I think it's important to be told."

The 20-30 minute guided tours are Friday through Sunday from 5-8:30 p.m. behind the Hermiston Seventh-day Adventist Church, 855 W. Highland Ave. While waiting for tours to start, people are invited to wait in the warm church sanctuary and listen to music. Kids will be given little packets with a booklet and activities.

"I think it will help with the wait," Rincker said. "We have had problems with the wait being too long and we've had people leave because they have children that would get impatient."

About 100 costumed

actors participate in the dramatic production. In addition to members of the Hermiston and Anchor Point Seventh-day Adventist churches, other churches and community members have got involved with the effort. Located near the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the First Christian Church provides childcare.

Also, live animals include everything from sheep, goats and chickens to llamas, which are dressed up to look like little camels. The animals,

Rincker said, help provide an authentic experience of entering a village during Biblical times.

Provided as an outreach ministry, it's important to organizers to offer the experience free of charge. Some people, Rincker said, might not be able to attend if they had to pay. However, donations are gladly accepted.

"It's something we want to provide for our community," Rincker said.

For more information, call 541-567-9000.

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