

After 37 years, the songs end for a Portland middle school music teacher



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To get to the music room, you must leave the main building at Robert Gray Middle School, walk outside and down a set of steps to a blue metal door that opens into a long hallway.

It's symbolic, leaving behind math, science and social studies classes, because a different kind of education takes place in this room at this Southwest Portland school, the way it does in every elementary and middle school that offers a band program.

If you've played in a school band (Ainsworth 1966-68, snare drum), you know what I mean.

A music program at this level is almost always close to spinning out of control: Sour notes from time to time, shaky rhythm and, often, a lack of committed practice.

At the center of it all sits the band director whose crowning achievement is to get as many as 50 kids, some distracted, to start and end a song in unison, making it recognizable enough to an audience. You think explaining $3x-4=7+2x$ is difficult? Try getting a school band to make it through "Tonight," from West Side story in the key of Ab Major with chord changes and single notes, along with pianissimo and mezzo forte when the score calls for it.

And at Robert Gray, the notes are fading away.

Music teacher, Jeanne Berg, is retiring at the end of June, the end of a 37-year career. She has taught the sons and daughters of children who were once in this very room.

But before the curtain descends, she was busy getting ready for the band's end-of-the-year concert and an appearance in the Rose Festival's Junior Parade. Then she takes the 50-person choir to New York City where they will see the city and also perform on the street outside of the Empire State Building and at an outdoor market. She plans to take the group on a tour of Carnegie Hall, telling them to sing in the lobby so they can truthfully say they sang at Carnegie Hall.

"I cry a lot," Berg said while sitting at her desk while her students fill the room and take their seats.

She tries to calculate how many students she's taught during her career. Best guess, she figures, is 4,000.

Any famous students?

She smiles.

"Chad White," she said. "He played alto sax here in 1990."

And?

"He lives in New York City," Berg said.

What?

Blue Note? Village Vanguard? Maybe the Birdland Jazz Club?

He's known," she said, "as the nation's No. 1 underwear model."

She laughed.

And so goes the life of a band teacher.

Berg learned how to play instruments while attending Mount Hood Community College. She later received her degree in education from Portland State University and eventually a master's in music education at the University of Portland.

Although a former French horn player of hers plays with a professional orchestra back east, Berg knows that most of the kids she's taught won't play an instrument beyond, possibly, high school.

Middle school band is an elective. When kids walk into her music room, they get a shot to be on the team. In her world, there is no such thing as a bench warmer.

"I want all kids to try," she said. "Even if it's painful to hear, the rule is to smile and clap. There's nothing like seeing the light go on in a kid's eyes. When they work as a unit, it's absolute magic. I want them to leave me having a love of music that they carry with them the rest of their lives."

Berg announced her retirement during the annual December school concert, drawing gasps from former students had come back for the traditional event that always brings alumni back to the school auditorium.

Berg, 58, divorced with a grown daughter, said her students have taught her as much as she's taught them.

"I learned more the first year I taught in class than I ever did in college," she said. "My kids taught me patience. Daily, I'm reminded of the middle school mentality. What we as adults might think isn't a big deal, is to them. I've learned to feel, and understand, their pain."

Berg looks over her students, who have taken their spots, instruments in hand. She's ready to count them off, to start practicing.

She pauses.

The rule for middle school band teachers who retire is that they don't come back to school for any concerts for three years. That gives the new teacher a chance to play without a musical ghost hovering nearby.

So Berg knows that she won't see these kids again.

This is it, the last practice.

"Drummers, you get to set the cadence," she calls out.

And so it starts.

And so it ends.

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