



A conversation with Patsy Andrews-Vert

with Derek Klassen

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I recently had the honour and privilege to get together with Mrs. Patsy Andrews-Vert, longtime band teacher, former MBA board member, and all-round champion of music education. Patsy has been active in the music education scene for over 30 years in both Saskatchewan and Manitoba, and her contributions to her many students and to our community are numerous. Recently retired, Patsy continues to serve on various boards and volunteer organizations, in addition to subbing regularly in the Prairie Rose and Red River Valley areas.

Where and when were you born?

I was born in Melita, MB on February 26, 1961.

Tell me about your early experiences in music.

I started singing in junior church choir when I was three, and I had to memorize everything, because I couldn't read yet. It's surprising, since I can't memorize anything now! I started taking piano when I was about seven years old. In school, we had "classroom music" in early years, but it was the classroom teacher who taught it (not a music specialist), so it was basically singing – which I was good with! When I moved to Souris, we had a music specialist, so from mid-grade 4 to grade 6 I had that. Then in grade 7, we chose band or art, and I chose band. From there on I took band all the way through high school.

Give us a brief synopsis on how you became a music educator. Were there specific people or experiences that inspired you?

I took piano and band all the way through school, and I always attended IMC for a week each summer. I was also very involved in 4-H during my school years. As I neared high school graduation, my two choices on what to pursue were Home Economics (now known as Human Ecology) or Music. The first day of grade 12 I went to see the "advisor" in the office, and I said "I think I'm going to go into music", to which her reply was "I was hoping you'd say that! Anyone can go into Home Ec, but not just anyone can go into music successfully." When I heard that, it was like confirmation that it was the right thing for me to do, so that was how I made my initial decision. I entered the Faculty of Music at Brandon University right out of high school. In my final year, even before I had received my diploma, the band director in Reston/Sinclair/Elkhorn/Kola was in an accident, and so myself and another girl who I was graduating with split the job for about 6 weeks in April/May – she did two schools and I did two – that way we could still have time to go to job interviews as well. It was way more money than we were used to at the time!

Describe some of your early teaching assignments.

Right out of university, I applied for a job in Neepawa and didn't get it. There weren't many jobs available in Manitoba that year (1984) – it was pretty dry, even in Winnipeg. I applied in Saskatchewan, and was hired with the Arcola School Division, which is just over the border – straight west on highway number two. There I taught for seven years in Bellegarde, Redvers, Manor, Wawota, and Kennedy, and lived in Redvers. The first year I taught at all five schools, but by the end of my time there was down to just three. The cool thing about that job was that we also had two divisional bands that met once a week. It was mostly parent-driven, and I think we

met Mondays after school in Carlyle, which was a central location. In this way we got to team teach – there were two band directors and we shared a common library. It was a very cool experience as a new teacher. The fellow that I initially team taught with was a seasoned teacher from Ontario. Then Blaine McClary came in – he had taught in Swan River for a while – and he was a master teacher, just amazing. The other person that worked with him in Swan River or maybe Yorkton was Murray Lawrence. By my last year in this position, a new teacher came in to do the other half, but by then I had some experience and could help out the new person – just the coolest experience! Team teaching has been a very positive and worthwhile experience any time that I’ve had the opportunity to do it.

Upon retirement, you had held your position in St. Paul’s/Starbuck/Sanford for 25 years. What are some accomplishments from your time there that you are particularly proud of?

I would say the growth in the program over the years – when I arrived at St. Paul’s there were about 35 students, and when I left we had about 100 – we had been above that number, but of course the school populations go up and down. We always sort of prided ourselves at St. Paul’s that we were around 50% of the student population in band. I always had supportive administration at St. Paul’s, which was a huge part of the success.

What is a memorable experience from your teaching career?

The kids always looked SO forward to going on tour every other year. Sometimes we had to make concessions on the type of trip, because going to “place x” just wasn’t in the cards financially for enough of the group. If they didn’t pretty much all go, then no one was going! I learned early on from my kids that they preferred to play for other kids – that when they went on tour they didn’t really care if they went to a festival. A festival was memorable for ME, and was a great educational opportunity, but in the end it wasn’t really something that they talked about afterwards. Reading the kids and knowing what will work for each group is important. Probably the most memorable experience – and one that the kids still talk about when I see them in Wal-Mart or wherever – is playing for inner-city kids in Minneapolis. Some of them have really tough backgrounds. Those kids love music, and as soon as you start to play, they move. There is nothing more than knowing that you’ve reached your audience. And for the students, being asked for an autograph from a little kid is just the ultimate!

What advice do you have for younger directors or recent graduates entering the field?

Know your students. No amount of clarinet technique or score study will help you know who you are teaching. You just have to get to know your students. It does take time, but you have to know your students and your community, especially in rural areas. How do you do that? You have fun once in a while, you supervise dances, you go to their basketball games, go to their 4-H achievement events, and just get out there. You also have to be you, and also let them be them – no matter how much you want to or try to, you cannot mold your students into you!

Further to the last question, what are your thoughts on keeping a healthy work/life balance in the music teaching profession?

As I got older, I realized I needed to leave things at school. That’s not something you know when you’re young, or can even necessarily do when you’re young. When I started teaching, it didn’t matter when we went on tour, but as I got older I began to guard certain times such as Spring Break and May Long Weekend, and I started only going back to my classrooms after Labour Day. I felt it was better for me to take that break, and then if I needed to stay longer hours the first week back in September, that was fine. If you’re given personal days, use them; if you’re sick, stay home! There are busy times of year for sure, but those happen in any profession. In our profession we are fortunate to have built in chunks of time to slow down – we need that time. Since my husband is a pastor, we would also take some time each year to go away – if not flying somewhere, then just going away for a few days. Even if we had time off at home, there were still phone calls, people at the door, the computer, etc. Sometimes you just need to unplug and get away!

You have and continue to wear many hats within the MBA and beyond. What projects are you currently involved in?

My other love besides teaching band and being involved with bands is handbells. I got involved in that 27 years ago after we were married. Our church was given a set of handbells, and so my husband and I went to IMC to learn how to play bells. We've just continued with it – it's something that he and I do together – we have a choir at our church, I'm very involved provincially, I play in a quartet in Winnipeg, and I'm the national chair. This also leads to international gatherings, one of which we held in Vancouver this past summer – representatives from Japan, Korea, Australia, Britain, North America, and others attend, so it's a big deal. Since it was held in Canada, I chaired that meeting as well, which was very cool. In two years, I'll go to Australia, and I'll probably be the Canadian rep there.

Why do you feel it is important for teachers to get involved in associations like the MBA & MMEA?

It's the island thing. If you don't get involved in this field, especially in cases where band is only a portion of your job, you'll end up isolated. By belonging to a professional organization, at least you have contacts that do some of the research for you and make your job easier. You can ask people "What are you playing with your kids for Christmas?" or "What are you playing with your kids for festival?". That's the other side of it – you can take your kids to events like Optimist and Solo and Ensemble and the list goes on. You might not go every year, but when it will benefit the kids, then go! There again you need to know your students.

In your view, how can we best advocate for band education?

That's a tough question. We all know what we do well, but often we don't "advertise" it as much as we should, or we don't explain it to others in a way that they can understand. This advocacy piece is something I've struggled with my entire career. I know what it is and what it should be, but to communicate that – and I don't mean simply putting a paragraph in the school newsletter – is difficult. I really feel that advocacy goes right back to your connection with the community. Community groups help a lot. The Prairie Redcoats are out of Miami/Somerset, and we had a community band in Winkler for a few years under Paul Moen as well. My friend Margaret and I went down to play in that one, and now we go to play in the Westwood Community Band every week. Last year we came to Starbuck to do a concert, and we are coming again this week to do another one. Last year I had my three oldest students from Starbuck play together with the community group for one piece, and a similar thing will happen this week. This is a good way to show people that music doesn't stop after high school – you can and should continue to be involved in it throughout life.

What is the value of being able to participate in a school band program?

Teamwork. Everybody is a piece of the puzzle. You don't have to be a "star" on your particular instrument in order to be part of that larger group. Now in later years, we've all had kids with special needs who contribute many things to our ensembles – not always musically or rhythmically – but they contribute inclusion, acceptance, and many times humour! Those students can come on tour with us, but they would not be able to go on tour with the basketball or volleyball team, at least not as a player. I think it's also a way that we can give back to the community. Need someone to play trumpet for Remembrance Day? Very often we can – not every time, but sometimes. We can provide Christmas concerts, which is part of Canadian tradition in many areas. These events bring people together, and bring parents and grandparents into the school that would likely never come otherwise.

Is there anything you would like to share with the Manitoba band community?

We are very fortunate in Manitoba to have such a strong band community – in fact we have a strong music community. MBA, MCA, MMEA, the Manitoba Guild of English Handbell Ringers, and the Manitoba Orff Chapter are all strong – we are lucky in Manitoba! We have people who are willing to

share and willing to volunteer time to be part of those organizations. We all know that volunteerism is down in society in general, but I don't think these organizations have seen any suffrage. Our band community is very supportive of one another, and always willing to share – we really do a great job of paying it forward, and the MBA ties us all together.

THANK YOU PATSY!