

Influential music teacher Penny Sedore dies at 75



Penny Sedore, a local teacher who helped foster a love of music for generations of students, has died at 75.

Sedore, former Head of Music at Dr. G.W. Williams Secondary School, passed November 11.

Following her passing, she was hailed as a loving wife, mother, and friend and mentor to "countless" students who passed through the halls of Williams over the 30 years she spent teaching within its golden-hued walls on Dunning Avenue.

She came by her music and teaching roots honestly. Raised by a principal father and a night school director in Windsor, ON, she began playing piano at the age of eight and, by the age of 12, she had graduated to playing Mozart concertos with the Windsor Junior Symphony and giving her own music lessons.

When she joined the Williams faculty in 1980, she had 20 kids in her music department. 30 years later, she had 30 kids in her Grade 9 class, in addition to the senior jazz band, senior concert band, and Grade 10 intermediate band. At that time, the Junior Band alone had 75 members.

Relating to students, she said upon her retirement, was a key to success "treat students with respect and you'll get that back" along with exposing her students to the best of the best in the music world.

"I want them to hear the best and the finest," she said. "It gives them a shot in the arm and it gives me a shot in the arm, too."

Sedore's impact on music students wasn't confined to Aurora. Over her long career, she led her students to festival success from coast to coast, and around the world "receiving the rank of Honorary Colonel in Kentucky" for fostering the goodwill of the arts internationally in the process.

When she finally hung up her baton, she shared one story which exemplified her dedication.

In the waning days of the winter of 1990, she was scrambling to find an extra \$5,000 to finance a trip to Vancouver with her gold medal-winning jazz band. While the students were asked to perform for the festival after medalling, it would still cost \$20,000 to get everyone there and back.

With the help of local businesses and family contacts, she brought in an impressive \$15,000, but there was more work to do.

'The week before, I was going to have to cancel the trip and give all the money back, but my guitar player's mother walked in with a cheque for five grand,' she said. 'She said, 'My father passed away last week and this is my inheritance. Your jazz band has kept my son in school. If it wasn't for playing in the jazz band, he would not have come to school, so he is graduating because of you.' She handed over the whole inheritance to me and we made Vancouver.'

Former student, musician Gregg Lawless, who achieved Juno-nominated acclaim with his French children's albums recorded under the name Gregg LeRock, recalls that students always wanted to play in the Williams band because of the 'standards Penny set and the music the band played.'

'Other high school bands were playing Glenn Miller ' we were playing Stevie Wonder and the Weather Report. It was cool and exciting,' he says. 'Students wanted to play well because they loved the music' and they wanted to play well for her because they respected her unwavering passion and commitment to helping them perform as a tight, dynamic, joyful unit. It was hard work. And it was tonnes of fun.

'She let students try out new instruments ' I played trumpet, drums, bass and guitar ' and for those of us who played in rock bands outside of music class, she gave us our first opportunity to perform in front of a large audience. We'd be the 'opener' for the jazz band for performances in elementary feeder schools, at high school assemblies and at music nights' and she didn't mind that we were playing Rush and Jimi Hendrix. When I wrote my first song, she asked me if I wanted to perform it at the next assembly' in front of 1,000 students. It was a great way to get over stage fright in a hurry.

'She took great pride in her students' post-secondary accomplishments. As a lifetime professional songwriter and musician, I was so fortunate to remain friends with Penny through the years and so grateful to have her attend my concerts. It gave me with multiple opportunities to thank her for the huge role she played in my love for music and performing. When I was nominated for my first Juno award, she was the first to call me.

'Penny was, in the very best sense, ambitious. She wanted her students to reach their full potential, she didn't settle for a 'good' performance. She entered her bands in the top festivals in Canada, and pushed her students to strive for excellence. And yes, they won' a lot. She was demanding but fair. When you did things well, she praised you. When you weren't playing to your potential, she let you know that you could and needed to be better. The life lessons we learned from her went far beyond the music room.'

By Brock Weir