

Published May 16th, 2018

Acalanes musical educator set to retire

By John T. Miller



Norm Dea at "the office." Photo John T. Miller

Revered music instructor Norm Dea, who worked 35 years in the Acalanes Union High School District, will retire at the end of this school year. Instead of answering the bell in August on the first day of school, he will be vacationing in Kauai.

"I loved working with the students," says Dea. "The best moments for me have been getting a chance to talk to them and watch them grow up as people and to hear about their future plans. It's satisfying to know that I have some effect on how they grow up."

Dea's career nearly didn't get off the ground. He always wanted to be a music teacher, citing the influence of his Marina Junior High School instructor George Carter, but after earning a degree in music and music education from San Francisco State University, and finishing his student teaching at Tamalpias High School in Mill Valley, Dea spent a year and half looking for a job.

"There were 50-70 candidates for each opening and I made plenty of interviews, but no job offers," recalled Dea. "I was almost ready to give it up and go back to college for a degree in technology."

His break came when his mentor at Tamalpias, Bob Greenwood, recommended Dea to ex-band director at Acalanes, L. LeRoy Roach. Dea interviewed and got his first job in August 1983 at Las Lomas.

"It was a small, underdeveloped program and the band was tiny. We were required to do marching band and I wasn't having a lot of fun," said Dea. "I thought about resigning, but then our Winter Concerts were good and we started picking up more and more students from our feeder school, Walnut Creek Intermediate."

Dea was the sixth teacher in six years, and, by staying for 25 years, the stability helped build the program into one of the best in the state.

In 2008, Dea made one of the most difficult decisions in his career and moved to Acalanes to take over for Rick Meyer. One of the deciding factors was the opportunity to have a string orchestra, and to follow what he called two legendary teachers - Meyer, who taught 24 years at AHS, and Roach, who taught 27 years. Both are in the California Music Educators Association Hall of Fame.

The transition was difficult at first, according to Dea. "They were resistant to the change of teachers and it took a little work and patience, but when the third year came I felt we were all on the same page and I had won the kids over."

On a typical day, Dea arrives at AHS at 5:30 a.m. for paperwork, score study, and classroom preparation. He greets the Jazz Band at 7:30 a.m. and after a full day of teaching, he might still be there late into the evenings with concerts, rehearsals, or other events. Often, he travels with groups over the weekend. "It's time consuming," said Dea, "but also a labor of love. It's been fun."

He's had scores of memorable moments over the years, and pointed to an example this year, when the wind ensemble traveled to a high-end band and orchestra festival at Sonoma State University at Weill Hall. "We were in the Green Music Center, a jaw-dropping beautiful concert hall with a large audience and national adjudicators. The students were outstanding," said Dea. "We went into the clinic and just glowed about it."

Many former students around the country keep in touch with Dea on social media, and will often sit down over coffee or drinks and visit. They tell him about college and if they're still playing. "Even though most of them don't continue in music careers, it's nice to see them be good music consumers and understand the value of music education."

Dea mentioned a pair of former students who are still in music, one being John Douglas, from Las Lomas, who works as a saxophone coach at Acalanes, and another is Will Baker, who graduated from AHS and subs in the San Francisco Symphony and Opera on bass trombone.

An overriding influence in Dea's career came from Greenwood, his Tamalpias High mentor. "He instilled values that I still use today, including giving back to my profession through service."

Dea is proud of his leadership roles in music education, including serving as president of the 15-county CMEA Bay Section, president of the State CMEA, and as president of the California Band Association. With these positions added to his teaching load, it was like he had two full-time jobs.

Although Dea will officially retire on June 11, a previous commitment will take him - along with 42 students and 12 parents - to Munich, Salzburg and Vienna from June 19-27 where they will play in concert

halls and outdoor amphitheatres.

When asked how he was able to fund all the activities, Dea laughed and said, "I just hold out my hand and the parents give me a check." Seriously, he added, "The parents in the Performing Arts Boosters have been very generous in funding and being there at concerts for help with logistics and chaperoning."

Dea also mentioned the Lafayette Partners in Education as a great source for funding and support.

Bruce Lengacher, the Vocal Music instructor at AHS who has worked alongside Dea for the past 10 years, said, "Norm is an icon in musical education in the state of California. He pulled the state out of the red in 2013 in smart and resourceful ways, and then worked to get all the musical organizations back together under one umbrella called the California All-State Music Education Conference. He's one of the most efficient teachers I've ever seen. I consider him a great colleague and a friend."

After his Kauai vacation, Dea will return to the area and plans to stay busy in the musical education arena, judging festivals, giving clinics, and mentoring younger teachers. "I also hope to pick up my tuba again and play in some of the local bands," he said. "I don't think I'll have any problem keeping busy in my retirement."

Some shared words about Mr. Dea

From Reider Martinsen, a senior in the Symphonic Wind Ensemble:

"Mr. Dea is one of my favorite teachers, and I've really enjoyed having Band with him for the last four years. I love walking into the band room because he greets me with a fist bump or a hug. He's a funny guy, too, which makes our class entertaining."

From SeoYoung Kim, a sophomore in the String Orchestra:

"All I know is that I'll really miss his interesting humor. I just want to know what his next Instagram user name will be. "

From Janis Workman, parent of Kenny, a senior in the Symphonic Wind Ensemble and Jazz Ensemble, Emma, a junior in the Symphonic Band, and Walter, a freshman in the Concert Band.

"Mr. Dea ... has a quick wit, but manages to see the good in each of his students. All three of my teenagers are studying with Mr. Dea this year, and he has managed to convince each of them that they are his favorite. He will be dearly missed at Acalanes and in our family."

From Suzanne Everly, Acalanes Instrumental Music Boosters President and parent of Ryan, a junior in the Symphonic Wind Ensemble and in the Jazz Ensemble, and Kyle, a sophomore in college who played for Mr. Dea for four years.

"Both of my kids had the privilege of having Mr. Dea as a teacher. He encouraged them to challenge themselves as musicians, as well as individuals. Not only did he teach them to appreciate all different genres of music, but he also taught them the 'language' of music, self-discipline, accountability and being part of a 'team.' My children are better people because of having a teacher like Mr. Dea."

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