

Russ Faunce – NYSSMA® President



Don't Give Up. You Make a Difference.

A quick story to inspire you as you approach and navigate the 2022 NYSSMA solo and ensemble festival season.

Several months ago, my wife, Laurie, and I had the opportunity to join some dear friends for dinner in a local hometown restaurant. We happily accepted the invitation. A couple of days later, my friend called and asked if it was okay to invite another couple with whom he worked. I quickly endorsed the idea and anxiously awaited Friday night to enjoy some good food, old friends and possibly new friends.

Following the initial introductions and during the drinks and appetizer portion of our evening, the conversation quickly turned to what we each did for a living. Laurie and I were in the minority at the table, with the other four all working in the medical profession: a couple of hospital administrators, a physician's assistant, and a nurse educator.

At the point where the conversation fell to my profession, I announced that I was going to be the president of the New York State School Music Association. The direction of our conversation was about to change. Come to find out, the nurse educator, the wife of one of our fellow diners, was a student flutist from the Syracuse area who had grown up performing NYSSMA solos in the late 80s/early 90s. She remembered where the festivals took place, the pieces she had played, and even the scales that were assigned. Thirty years later she remembered vivid details from her NYSSMA experiences. Her voice was filled with pride and excitement in telling me what an important part of her musical education NYSSMA had played.

Much to the chagrin of the others at the table, except Laurie, the conversation centered around NYSSMA for the bulk of our dinner. The others had all been musical in school, but did not have the same connection as the flutist to music education, specifically NYSSMA. She wanted to know how the process had evolved over the years and how things were different. I explained that not a lot

had changed regarding NYSSMA evaluations. She was quite surprised to hear that the evaluation sheet had remained intact for 30 years. Frankly, I was a bit surprised at how familiar she was with the entire process.

Pride in a perfect score

A few months later on a snowy Wednesday evening, as luck would have it, the same group met in the same restaurant for an encore. Enough time had passed that I had just recently assumed the role of president of NYSSMA. Laurie and I were the last to arrive, so we took the two remaining chairs at the table, leaving me seated next to this huge NYSSMA fan. She immediately handed me an envelope. I could feel her excitement bubbling as I opened it to find her meticulously folded NYSSMA solo evaluation sheet with her 1991, seventh grade, Level IV, "perfect score," of 28.

The NYSSMA solo sheet made its way around the table, and my medical friends were fascinated by the detail that the sheet provided. Questions abounded about the process and how proficient a seventh grader must have been to accomplish the ultimate goal of achieving 28 out of 28 possible points.

Thirty years had passed, and the pride and sense of accomplishment this woman was feeling hadn't diminished one iota. She shared every detail of her performance with us and wanted to discuss every plus sign checked in each of the little boxes. A NYSSMA solo experience had left such a life-altering impression on this young musician, who never pursued a career in music, that she would be beaming with pride as she shared it with the current NYSSMA president three decades later.

The entire conversation reminded me of the hundreds of students I took to my local NYSSMA solo and ensemble evaluation festival in Watertown when I was teaching. Memories flooded back to

me of reading the evaluation sheet with my student looking over my shoulder, reinforcing all the things that had gone well and explaining the adjudicators' suggestions for improvement. This time, I was having the conversation with a highly successful professional woman who had learned what performing a NYSSMA solo was all about — finding PRIDE in working hard and doing an outstanding job. Decades later, the process remains the same, but the impact, value, and significance of a NYSSMA evaluation also remain the same.

The arts remain essential

As music educators, sometimes we get caught up in the daily routine, and I don't think we take the time to think about the tremendous impact we have on our students. Whether it's a field trip, a concert, a musical, or a seventh grade NYSSMA solo, we must never lose sight of the importance music education plays in the development of New York's young musicians. The arts are as important, if not more important, to the growth of young people today as they were in 1991.

I encourage you to think about this story when you've reminded a student for the tenth time that a Bb scale has an Eb in it or that breath support is the foundation of all good intonation. It's the weeks and months of preparation that lead to success and the lifelong sense of accomplishment that you provide to the hundreds of students who become your legacy.

Don't give up. You are making a difference in these students' lives that they'll carry with them forever. It's important, and I hope my story can serve to inspire you when the day-to-day becomes burdensome or the setbacks seem more numerous than the gains.

All my best for a successful and rewarding 2022 NYSSMA festival season ||