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## EDITOR'S PAGE

Dan Bilawsky – *School Music News* Editor



# PASSING THE TORCH

*A new editor reflects on the changing of the guard and the power of enduring influences*

Sometimes a metaphor has a way of following you and illuminating its own relevance. At least that's been my experience of late. In February of 2024 I was considering the theme for a composition I planned to commission for the Harborfields High School Jazz Band. And, being mere weeks away from taking that ensemble to New Orleans for a whirlwind four-day trip where parents, siblings, alumni, some current (and future) students, a retired colleague and friend, and my wife (a fellow Harborfields band director) and our two children planned to travel to show their support, there was real emotion in the air.

I was seriously musing on the concept of mentorship, community, what we pass on to each other and how that impacts our development both as individuals and as part of a greater whole. With all of that swimming around, the theme for the commission revealed itself.

I reached out to a writer whom I admire, GRAMMY-nominated composer/arranger Oded-Lev Ari, and I asked him if he would be willing to take on the project. He graciously agreed, I shared some specifics about the anticipated ensemble (range, strengths, etc.) and without going *too* far into detail about underlying thoughts, I handed him the title: "Passing the Torch."

In those moments, the seeds for that composition were sown. But little did I realize how much weight that phrase would come to carry beyond that scope. Almost exactly 12 months later, having taken that memorable trip, finished out the school year, received the commissioned work and started to rehearse it with the band for a spring 2025 premiere, I was seated at a table being introduced to the NYSSMA® Executive Council as the incoming editor of this publication — only the fourth person to hold the position in the organization's 93-year history. The significance certainly wasn't lost on me.

When my immediate predecessor Tom Gellert began his tenure in 1994, I was a senior in high school, a percussionist excited to attend the NYSSMA® Winter Conference for the first time. My name was one of hundreds that Tom laboriously typed into what would be the first of many all-state programs at his desk over the course of three decades. Unbeknownst to either of

us, we were linked from that point on.

After completing my undergraduate studies at Indiana University and starting my teaching career on Long Island, Tom became one of my greatest supporters — a supervisor, sounding board and friend rolled into one. Through our lengthy discussions in classrooms, on bandstands, in cars, and during school trips, he taught me more than a few things about music and life. He was passing the torch before I ever knew it.

Looking back across my entire journey I now see that I've been blessed to have had so many significant role models share their knowledge and keep the flame burning and going. There's my mother, Harriette Bilawsky, a retired music educator, longtime NYSSMA® member and my first private teacher; *her* private instructor — legendary drum pedagogue Al Miller — who I later studied with throughout high school; my father, Bernard Bilawsky, who's been the most notable non-musical influence on my life (and who's still teaching in his 80s); Barbara Yarvin, Michelle Lindsley and Brad DeMilo, chief among so many fine music educators present in my formative years in the Farmingdale Public Schools; Wilber England, who had a transformative effect on my playing and mindset during my Hoosier heyday; Hal Hanauer and Irwin Handburger, remarkable influences outside of the musical sphere; Harborfields mentors, including Tom Gellert and Don Haudenschild, and world-wise peers in the district, like Jessica Lowenhar and my wife, Allison Scilla; and numerous others who have left an indelible mark in some way, shape, or form. That's just a small sampling of those who've had an enduring impact on my life in and out of the profession. I can only hope I've had even a fraction of similar influence on others in my various roles.

Since arriving at Harborfields near the dawn of the new millennium, I've had the pleasure of working at every level from elementary through high school. At this point, as I enter my 27th year of teaching, I serve that community by directing a variety of ensembles — middle school and high school concert, jazz and marching bands — and through my efforts as our district-wide department coordinator.

Volunteering for our county organization, I spent many years co-coordinating SCMEA's jazz programs. And, I've had the good fortune of conducting honor ensembles — everything from young concert bands to high school jazz ensembles — throughout the region. Beyond the school ecosystem I have two decades of experience moonlighting in music journalism, writing primarily about jazz and music education for various Web and print media outlets.

So many of those pursuits have given me the opportunity to serve as a bridge—connecting tweens to middle school and teenagers to high school, crossing and trestling different musical and stylistic disciplines, straddling the educator/administrator divide, unifying people from different schools under the banner of belonging, and binding sound subjects on the page. I firmly intend to bring those connective capabilities to my work with NYSSMA® and my writing as the Editor for *School Music News*.

As we all embark on this new school year, exciting and nerve-racking all at once, I ask you to take a moment to think about passing the torch. Consider the impact that others have had on you and make your own list like the one I created above. Give those people your thanks. They deserve it. Then take a few seconds to reflect on how you're passing along your well-earned wisdom, which evolved from *their* hard-earned knowledge, and think on the profound nature of your work. Don't let anyone minimize what you do and how you make a difference.

In this day and age, it's far too easy to lose sight of the light you carry and the positive force within your presence. Stand tall and remain proud of what you say, project, and represent. I appreciate you. Those around you value you. And, you are the heart of what NYSSMA® stands for. I thank you for indulging me in sharing part of my story as a means of introduction, and I look forward to future editorials that will allow me to give voice to all that we share in the world of music education and modern life.

Now, don't be shy in sharing your story. I want to hear it and others will, too. Pass your torch and let the recipients help keep it burning bright. ||