

AN OPEN LETTER TO MY GRANDDAUGHTER (AND OTHER NEWLY MINTED MUSIC EDUCATORS)

So, you have a music education degree in hand and have begun your first job in what promises to be a fruitful and rewarding career teaching and making music with your students. It is an exciting time in your life, one full of anticipation and possibility.

While teaching and developing your career will demand much of your energy, it is important to consider the other elements that contribute to a good life. Of course, you must care for your mental and physical well-being, but it is also important that you nurture your musical self.

Many people enter the field of music education because of the wonderful musical experiences they had as students, and they want to continue to experience that joy and share it with others. The tricky part is that what was once your hobby is now your profession, and you need to find new outlets for experiencing and expressing your love of music not only within the classroom(s) where you teach, but also beyond.

As someone with lived experience, I have some ideas for you to consider. First, you can put your teaching skills to use in the community by teaching private lessons, conducting civic ensembles, directing musicals, directing pit bands, coaching students preparing for solo festival(s) and college auditions, working in early childhood music programs, and teaching at summer camps.

Second, you can continue performing by joining community ensembles, supplementing school or college ensembles, playing in pit orchestras, playing in rock bands, participating in church or synagogue or other music ministries, forming chamber ensembles, playing or singing for weddings and other events, performing for retirement communities and nursing homes, being an accompanist, giving solo recitals, joining the local AFM, or just jamming with your friends. The list goes on and on.

Some of these opportunities are volunteer and some are paying gigs, but in both types of instances you will be attending to your musical needs while bringing music into the lives of the people around you. The paid gigs will, of course, be of help generating extra income.

Everyone has unique skills and interests, and you will find what suits you best. I personally had the opportunity to play for such artists as Rod Stewart, Wayne Newton, Manhattan Transfer, Ronnie Milsap, Harry Connick, Jr., Shirley Jones, Frank Sinatra, Jr., Tony Bennett, Anne Murray, Natalie Cole, and Lori Morgan, among other notables. Working with these professionals and their music directors provided interesting experiences that I will never forget, gifting many fond memories and stories to tell.

On a side note here, I offer some instrument-specific advice: If you are a violinist, learn viola. There are gigs avail-

able if you can learn that funny clef! And if you are a woodwind player, double or triple to make yourself more versatile.

While I have covered many topics, I have not yet mentioned all the professional opportunities open to you through NYSSMA®, NAFME, and your county Music Educators Association (MEA). Membership in these organizations places you in a community with other music educators and provides you with a wealth of resources you cannot find elsewhere.

The annual NYSSMA® Winter Conference offers many sessions that can help you in your teaching, as well as provide opportunities for professional and social networking. Learning from other music educators is an invaluable experience. Take every opportunity you can to observe rehearsals at festivals and learn from guest conductors, visit others' classrooms, and invite experienced educators to work with your students. This will offer new perspectives to both you and them.

There are many ways for you to serve the profession beyond what I've mentioned. For example, you might organize county and state festivals, guest conduct at an all-county, or become an adjudicator for solo and ensemble festivals. Adjudicating will help you become a better teacher, as you must focus intently on the music-making process and how to help students become even better musicians.

As you gain experience, consider presenting at a conference session or a professional development day. Active engagement in these opportunities builds confidence, knowledge, skills, and relationships.

These are just a few experiences you can make happen to enrich your musical life. I am sure I am missing something that could be very important to you, but I know the things I mentioned are all possible since I have done almost all of them (except playing keyboard or guitar to accompany groups, and being part of a rock group. Those pursuits would not be pretty).

Best wishes to you as you venture into the wonderful world of music education. I hope you will have as fruitful and musically rewarding a career as I did. I enjoyed it all. You are just starting on this journey and I hope you love it, too. Enjoy. Tag, You're It!

Love, Grandpa

Ronald A. Hebert is a retired music educator who taught full-time for nearly 40 years in three different school districts in New York State. He retired in 2007 as District Coordinator of Music from Fayetteville-Manlius Schools where he taught orchestra and directed the school musical. He remains active with NYSSMA® as a clinician, adjudicator, and guest conductor.