

A Life-Long Teacher

Recently, the band director at my school announced that this school year will be his last. Mr. Lewis Dutrow is retiring after 38 years as a music educator, 37 of which were spent directing the band program (and leading the fine arts department) here at this high school.

The announcement did not come as a shock to me. I think we have been collectively bracing ourselves for his retirement for a few years now, feeling that every year he returned was a lucky break for us. Mr. Dutrow's not getting any younger and the schedule of a high school band director is demanding. For decades he has returned to school well before anyone else in August to plan and run band camp. He has stayed impossibly late on innumerable nights directing concerts and leading marching band and organizing community performances. He has taken band students to Myrtle Beach, Virginia Beach, and Orlando on multiple occasions over the years, enduring hours and hours of bus time and ridiculously demanding schedules on travel & performance days. He has built from the ground a truly incredible jazz program, and in recent years he began our area's first student steel drum ensemble. Some parent volunteers have been working with him for the entire high school careers of their 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 children, and then staying on for more years out of love for Mr. Dutrow and respect for his program and hard work. He has his own informal alumni network spread out in music education and performance across the country.

Mr. Lew Dutrow is a legend, not just in our community, but in our region (and I suspect more broadly as well but I don't know much about the music education community).

At this point, you might be wondering: "Why is this biology educator writing about a band director?"

I don't know anything about music. Working alongside Mr. Dutrow has not taught me anything about music, except that it takes a tremendous amount of work and

can empower young people in beautiful ways. I never studied music in any capacity, ever.

And yet.

Mr. Dutrow has been one of the most influential role models of my adult life.

Mr. Dutrow views teaching as aspirational. When he shares his story, he always emphasizes that he was the first in his family to go to college. That his parents not only supported his endeavor to become a music educator, but sacrificed and worked to help him get there. Mr. Dutrow, taking his place as conductor during a high school band concert, makes it abundantly clear that he is living his dream. At his final ensemble concert, his mother was present and he thanked her, tearfully, for supporting his work. For him, teaching was never a stepping stone to somewhere else. Teaching is the mountaintop. He exudes a bemused humility at having achieved the greatness of a dedicated and talented public school teacher.

Mr. Dutrow's teaching is a work in progress. It is the end of April in his 38th year of a career that has been, by every possible measure, a resounding success. This weekend, he's directing his jazz ensemble group in two different events, both of which are firsts for this ensemble. He has expressed his great excitement at the opportunity to have his band perform at the Smithsonian this weekend. Mr. Dutrow speaks about his professional learning with fervor. He constantly collaborates with his colleagues in and out of our building. He routinely invites other directors and music professionals into his classroom to work with his kids. With about five years left in his career he launched a brand-new steel drum ensemble which has inspired steel drum ensembles at other schools in our area. His students, his students' parents, his colleagues, his supervisors—every person in our community loudly extolls his greatness and his effectiveness as an educator. He responds by quietly going about his business of continuing to learn more about music and teaching.

Mr. Dutrow embodies community. He talks lovingly and authentically about the “band family.” He and the band are present at every significant school event of the year: freshman orientation, every pep rally, every football game, Homecoming, Back to School Night, graduation. He and the band are present at a number of our greater community events, like Jazz in the Woods, the fall

community picnic, a summer music series on one of the local lakes. Mr. Dutrow and the Band Boosters organize a jazz concert every year featuring alumni who are professional jazz musicians, and the students have the opportunity to learn from these professionals. Our Band Booster organization is committed and active. He has cultivated generations of good will for our school. In so many ways, he *is* our school. To his colleagues, he is unfailingly kind and patient and universally respected. To his various administrators, he is gracious and deferential. He believes that our school is the greatest, that our school community is the most special. When he speaks about the greatness of our school and our community, you believe him, and you feel privileged to be here. You feel an urgency to live up to his great vision of our community, to be worthy of contributing to our school. Mr. Dutrow can address a crowd of students, parents, administrators, and teachers from a variety of schools and make each individual feel like a valued and necessary participant in a beautiful community. It is always authentic, always earnest, always passionate.

Mr. Dutrow loves his students. At his final ensemble concert, many graduating students took the opportunity to speak. To thank him for teaching them about music, but also for giving advice. For providing support. For making them feel valued and safe. For giving them a welcoming space. For always knowing and remembering every single student's name and instrument, even if he hadn't seen them in years. At every concert, including this final one, he centers the students and their growth and skill. He so obviously truly knows each kid (and he has so many!) and loves each student individually and uniquely.

Mr. Dutrow is a professional. I feel so fortunate that I've built a relationship with him in my (comparatively) few years here. I've chaperoned three band trips with him, I've tutored his daughter, I've attended most football games and a good handful of band concerts. When Mr. Dutrow sees me, he never uses my first name—always “Ms. Franckowiak.” But from him it feels warm and respectful, not cold and formal. He always asks how I'm doing and always looks pleased to see me. He listens when I speak. He knows the work I do around our building and asks me about it or gives me encouragement. He has always treated me with great respect in spite of the fact that he's been teaching for longer than I've been alive. He thinks that I do good work with our staff & students and his good opinion of me is one of my most treasured professional accomplishments. I want him to be proud of me, even though I'm not his student and don't know anything

about music. Mr. Dutrow is the embodiment of presuming positive intentions and presuming competence. He treats all of his colleagues with this great respect and conscientiousness.

Since my student teaching, I've thought about my time in the classroom as having an expiration date. I didn't expect to spend my entire professional career as a classroom teacher. Over the last couple of years, I've had numerous opportunities to learn more about other educational roles. I've done work in facilitating professional learning and curriculum, both areas I've considered options after the classroom. But this year in particular I have felt much more satisfied teaching children than in any of these other roles. And I look at Mr. Dutrow, and the community's response to his great legacy, and I see only the most powerful argument for an entire career spent working as a public school teacher.

Thanks for everything, Mr. Dutrow. I know you know how many students have learned music from you; I hope you know how many teachers have learned about teaching from you. May I be half as dedicated, half as loving, half as gracious. And may we all work to carry the great torch of our community here at the Lake when you leave us at last this June.