Josey J. Jimenez is in her eleventh year as Director of Bands at Duluth Middle School, where enrollment has more than doubled to over 300 students under her leadership. A proud product of Georgia's music education system, Ms. Jimenez is a graduate of South Effingham High School and holds degrees from the University of Georgia (B.M.Ed.), Georgia College & State University (M.M.Ed.), and Piedmont University (Ed.S.). While at UGA, Ms. Jimenez performed as a member of the University of Georgia Redcoat Marching Band. Go Dawgs! Ms. Jimenez serves as one of the Lead Teachers for Middle School Band in Gwinnett County Public Schools, where she helps support curriculum development and professional learning for band directors across the district. In her community, Ms. Jimenez is dedicated to fostering an inclusive, thriving environment where Duluth band students excel as both musicians and individuals. In addition to teaching, Ms. Jimenez is an active clinician and adjudicator throughout Georgia. She is a member of Sigma Alpha Iota, the Minority Band Directors National Association, the National Association for Music Education, and the National Band Association (in addition to GMEA!)

1. What inspired you to become a middle school band director, and what do you enjoy most about working with young musicians?

I always knew I would be a teacher. I was the kid who brought home old textbooks that teachers were throwing away so I could play school with my sisters. I loved to read, so I originally thought I would teach language arts. Music was always part of my childhood. My mother was always (and still is) an avid singer. She enrolled my sisters and me in the string program at our elementary school. We grew up singing everything from mariachi and Broadway musicals to Britney Spears and '80s rock hits. She also loved telling me about playing saxophone in her college band in Mexico. When I started middle school, I wanted to play saxophone just like my mom. I quickly fell in love with band and by seventh grade, my best friend and I had made a pact that we would grow up to be band directors.

I was absolutely certain, however, that I would teach high school. I wanted the football games, competitions, basics blocks, Grainger, Mackey; all of it. My own middle school experience was pretty rough. Like many people, I did not look back on ages 11-14 and think, *You know where I'd love to spend the rest of my adult life? Right back in 7th*

grade. But when it came time to student teach, I figured if someone handed me a room full of beginners, there was no faking it until I made it. So, just in case, I chose to student teach at a middle school and completely fell in love with it. Middle schoolers are funny, energetic, curious, and wonderfully unpredictable. They are right in the middle of figuring out who they are and where they fit in the world. Society tends to underestimate them, but I have watched 10- to 14-year-olds do incredible things, both in and out of the band room. They constantly remind me how capable young people are. 7th grade is now my absolute favorite to teach!

2. How does teaching middle school students differ from working with older musicians, and what unique opportunities does it provide?

What makes middle school music education so special is that we are not simply teaching students how to perform music. We are teaching them how to *be musicians*. We meet them before they know how to assemble an instrument, sit correctly in a chair, read their first note, or understand what it means to contribute to an ensemble. Three years later, those same students may be auditioning for District Honor Band, participating in other honor ensembles, performing challenging repertoire, and mentoring younger musicians. That progression from “Here is how we open the case” to genuine musical independence is astounding.

Because almost nothing can be assumed, we have the opportunity and responsibility to shape students' earliest habits, confidence, curiosity, and perception of what they are capable of accomplishing. A student can enter our room believing they are “not musical” or simply cannot do something difficult and leave three years later seeing themselves entirely differently. By the time we send them to our high school colleagues, I hope we have not simply created students who play their instruments well, but confident and curious young musicians who know how to learn, collaborate, take risks, and find joy in making music with others.

3. What are some of the most important lessons you hope your students learn through participation in band beyond musical skills?

Our Duluth Middle School Fine Arts Department has embraced the philosophy of “teaching life through music and creating musicians for life.” That summarizes what I

hope students take away from our program. Band teaches discipline, patience, resilience, responsibility, and collaboration. Students learn that their individual preparation affects an entire group, that leadership does not always mean being the loudest person in the room, and that mistakes are an essential part of getting better at something. Just as importantly, I want them to experience what it feels like to belong to a community where they are needed and valued. Years from now, most will not remember every scale they learned or piece we performed, but I hope they remember the confidence they developed, the relationships they built, and the feeling of accomplishing something difficult alongside people they cared about.

4. How do you foster an inclusive and welcoming environment within your band program?

For me, inclusion begins with making sure students genuinely see themselves as belonging in the band room. Duluth Middle School serves an incredibly diverse community, and I want our program to reflect and celebrate the students who walk through our doors every day. That influences the repertoire we program, musicians and composers we introduce, guest artists we bring in, and experiences we provide outside of the traditional concert band setting. We intentionally explore music from a variety of cultures and traditions and seek out composers whose voices have historically been underrepresented in our field.

But inclusion is just as much about the everyday culture of the classroom. It means learning students' stories, maintaining high expectations while providing the support necessary to reach them, creating multiple pathways to success, and making sure students know there is a place for them in our program. Representation matters, but ultimately students also need to know that they are known, valued, and wanted.

5. Can you share a memorable moment from your career that reinforced your passion for music education?

Two experiences immediately come to mind. This past summer during pre-planning, two students unexpectedly walked into our band room. The older student began showing her younger brother the instruments until she pointed to our tuba shelf and said, “And that's what I used to play: the tuba.” It was only then that I recognized her. She had been my student for no more than a year and a half several years earlier. She had experienced an incredibly difficult childhood and spent time in and out of foster care, sometimes missing school for long stretches of time. But when she was at school, she came to band ready to work and play. On particularly difficult days, she sometimes sat in the band office until she was ready to come back out. The band room became somewhere she felt safe, knew what to expect, and knew she was valued.

Standing there years later, she told me, “You know, what y'all do is important. I always knew I could come into the band room and talk to you about what was going on. This class was a big part of why I would make sure to come to school.” She is now thriving as a junior in high school and plans to attend law school and specialize in foster care law. She told me that because she experienced some of the worst of the foster care system, she wants to make sure children who come after her have a different experience.

The second happened when I had the honor of conducting an ensemble at the University of Georgia's MidFest. After our concert, one of the students in my ensemble asked to introduce me to her parents. She told me they had been so excited when she told them that her conductor was Latina. At the time, it felt like a normal post-concert interaction. It was on the drive home that its significance hit me. I thought about my own experience as a young musician and realized I hadn't seen many people who looked like me on the podium either. I had simply shown up to conduct a band, but my presence had communicated something to her that I hadn't realized needed to be said: there is a place for you here, too.

Those students remind me why I believe so deeply in music education. Yes, the music matters. We want beautiful performances and skilled musicians. But sometimes a band room is the reason a child wants to come to school. Sometimes seeing someone on a

podium allows a young musician to imagine herself standing there someday. We may never fully understand the ways our classrooms, relationships, and presence shape the young people in front of us. That is both the tremendous responsibility and incredible privilege of what we do.

6. What challenges do middle school band directors face today, and how do you work to overcome them?

Middle school band directors are navigating changing student needs, scheduling and enrollment pressures, limited resources, increasing costs, teacher workload, and countless things competing for students' time and attention. Accessibility is also an important challenge; financial, logistical, and cultural barriers can all affect a student's ability to participate fully in music education. In our program, we try to meet those challenges by continually prioritizing what is best for students and refusing to believe their circumstances should determine the quality of experience they receive.

I've also learned that we cannot (and should not) do this work alone. Collaboration with my co-director, fine arts department, administration, cluster, district colleagues, and educators throughout GMEA has become essential to how I approach teaching and leadership. Sharing resources and expertise makes all of our programs stronger. We also have to advocate by helping families, administrators, and communities understand the value of music education, then creating programs and experiences that demonstrate that value.

7. As the GMEA Multicultural Chair, what motivated you to take on this leadership role?

Becoming GMEA Multicultural Chair felt like a natural extension of work that has become increasingly important to me throughout my career. I have seen what happens when educators find community and when voices that have historically been less visible in our profession are intentionally welcomed into the conversation. I have also seen firsthand how much it can mean for a young musician to encounter a composer, clinician, educator, or musical tradition that reflects part of their own experience.

I accepted this role because I want to help create more of those opportunities across Georgia. I don't see the position simply as a way to celebrate diversity; I see it as an

opportunity to listen, connect people, share resources, recognize excellent work already happening across our state, and help ensure that all of Georgia's incredible students and educators can see themselves as part of our profession.

8. How do you define multiculturalism in music education, and why is it important for students and educators?

I define multiculturalism in music education as recognizing that there is no single story, tradition, or perspective that represents what music is or who musicians are. It means exposing students to music, composers, performers, and traditions from a broad range of cultures while approaching them with authenticity, curiosity, and respect. It also means valuing the cultural experiences students and educators already bring into our classrooms.

Multiculturalism should not be reduced to performing one culturally diverse piece or acknowledging a particular heritage during one month of the year. It should be naturally woven into how we teach, program, collaborate, and think about music. It gives students opportunities both to see themselves reflected in music education and to encounter people and experiences different from their own. For educators, it broadens our musical understanding and helps us become more thoughtful teachers.

9. What are your primary goals and priorities as GMEA Multicultural Chair?

One of my biggest priorities is to highlight and connect the multicultural work that is already happening across Georgia at every level and in every content area. This work is not limited to our most advanced ensembles performing diverse repertoire. Our elementary music teachers, for example, are experts at incorporating music from many cultures and traditions into their curriculum. Their work is especially significant because, in schools with an elementary music teacher, they have the opportunity to reach *every student* through music education. There is so much we can learn from one another across elementary, middle, and high school and across all of our musical content areas.

I also want to help educators discover high-quality repertoire and resources, elevate composers and musicians from historically underrepresented backgrounds, create opportunities for educators to connect, and continue building spaces where people feel that they belong in our professional community. Most importantly, I want this work to

invite everyone into the conversation. Multiculturalism is not the responsibility of educators from particular backgrounds; it is part of providing a comprehensive music education to every student. My goal is to make that work practical, collaborative, and increasingly embedded in what Georgia music educators already do so well.

10. How do you hope your work as GMEA Multicultural Chair will impact students, teachers, and music programs across Georgia?

Ultimately, I hope the impact reaches students. I want young musicians across Georgia to look at the music they perform, composers they study, clinicians standing in front of them, and educators leading their classrooms and recognize that there are many different ways to belong in the world of music. I want them to encounter both music that reflects their own experiences and music that helps them better understand someone else's.

For educators, I hope this work creates connections and provides practical resources while also giving us opportunities to learn from the excellent work already happening in classrooms across our state. I especially hope educators who have historically felt underrepresented in our profession feel a stronger sense of connection and see pathways into leadership themselves. My goal is not for multiculturalism to become one more initiative teachers have to fit onto an already full plate. I hope it becomes an increasingly natural part of how we define excellent music education in Georgia. That means broadening whose music we value, whose expertise we learn from, and who feels welcome in our professional community, ultimately expanding what we make possible for our students