

## **When did you know you wanted to become a music educator?**

For much of my childhood, my world revolved around sports. Through my elementary school years I was a highly competitive swimmer with dreams of the Olympics. Over time, the demands of swimming year-round became too much and I wanted to try other sports. I fell in love with baseball, a sport I played through High School, as well as basketball and football. While I enjoyed listening to music, the thought of making it a career path hadn't truly crossed my mind yet.

Everything changed in middle school when I went to band instrument selection and was recommended to play the saxophone. I quickly realized how much I enjoyed practicing and playing, but it was in high school that I found something even more profound: a true community. The band room became my second home, a place where I was surrounded by friends who felt like family. We grew up together, experienced joy and sorrow and everything in between, and did it all through music.

But it wasn't just about the social aspects. Guided by the vision of our incredible teachers, we were also united by a shared drive for excellence. We learned how to practice with purpose, work towards ambitious goals, and deliver performances we could be truly proud of. This growth mindset was familiar from my sports background and resonated deeply with me.

Despite my wonderful experience, I still had not focused in on teaching high school band as a career. In fact, when I was in undergraduate school at Furman University, I had dreams of being a conductor for a professional orchestra. This is obviously a lofty goal for a saxophone player, but I was determined not to let that little detail get in the way. This dream was largely inspired by watching John Williams conduct the Boston Pops on PBS in the 1980's, listening to countless movie soundtracks and classical recordings, and by the opportunities I had at Furman to perform with the Greenville and Asheville Symphonies. I earned my Bachelor's Degree in Music Theory and went to Northwestern University in Chicago to study conducting with the goal of being the next Sir Georg Solti. It wasn't until my time at Northwestern that I fully realized how much band meant to me, and how much I wanted to teach at the high school level. It marked a significant change in direction for me, but I became 100% sure that I wanted to create an environment for my students like the one I was able to experience years before.

And so, my path became clear. All those formative memories from my own high school days—the long rehearsals, the thrill of a great performance, the bus rides, the shared laughter, the drive to improve—crystallized into a singular mission. I wanted to create a program where kids had a second home, a safe place to become the best version of themselves, and the opportunity to create incredibly memorable performances—all through the lens of music. I was fortunate to spend seven years at North Cobb High School and twenty-three years at Sprayberry High School attempting to do just that. My only regret is that I didn't make it to the Olympics...at least not yet.

### **What instrument or instruments do you play?**

Saxophone is my primary instrument. Over the years I've played soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone saxophone in a variety of genres. Like many of my incredible band director colleagues, I also have a working knowledge of most other woodwind and brass instruments and have percussion skills that were once described as “enthusiastic”.

### **What is your favorite teaching memory?**

After teaching for 30 years it's almost impossible to pick just one memory. There are so many great performances, funny moments in the band room, and times I was just so proud of my students. But if I had to narrow it down to just one it would be my final LGPE performance with my students.

We ended the concert with "Russian Christmas Music" by Alfred Reed, which has always been one of my favorite compositions in the band literature. It was one of those moments where I was able to relax and just enjoy the moments that represented the culmination of months of hard work - a time where everyone was on the same page and working for a similar goal. Standing on the podium conducting my amazing students for one of the last times of my career - it was just one of those perfect moments that I will remember for the rest of my life.

### **What are you most looking forward to about being the President of GMEA?**

More than anything, I am looking forward to connecting with incredible music educators across our state. Georgia is full of passionate and talented teachers, and I truly believe our community is our greatest strength. Now that I've retired from the classroom, I'm excited to have the time to travel, visit your schools, and just listen—to hear about what's going well, what challenges you're facing, and to learn from all the amazing things you're doing every day. I want to be a president who is present, easy to talk to, and part of the conversations that matter to you.

I am also deeply committed to continuing the excellent work of our past leaders who have worked to foster a culture where we all feel empowered to actively improve our organization together. That means continuing to build bridges between our different genres and regions, making sure every single music teacher has a voice and feels valued—whether you're a brand-new teacher or a seasoned veteran, no matter who, what, or where you teach. By pooling our collective wisdom, we can thoughtfully refine our processes, making GMEA even more responsive to the needs of its members.

At the end of the day, serving as President is about service. I see my role as being a champion for every music educator in Georgia and making sure our organization keeps growing to support all our students and teachers. This first month has only confirmed what I already knew: our community is our biggest asset. I'm so excited to continue this work with all of you.

### **Who influenced you to become a music teacher?**

I was incredibly fortunate to learn from a series of amazing band directors and music teachers who became more than just teachers; they were true role models who shaped the person and educator I would become. I had the privilege of being mentored by my band directors, Gary Gribble and Alfred Watkins, and my private saxophone teacher, Bob Cowles, all of whom had a profound impact on my development as a musician and as a person. Outside of my parents, these three incredible people were the most important and meaningful mentors of my young life, and again when I returned to teach in Cobb County.

I was also fortunate to have incredible collegiate role models like Cliff Leaman, John Carmichael, Leslie Hicken, Dan Boda, Stephen Peterson and John Paynter who continued to show me the importance of music and helped me to find my place within it.

Each of them, in their own unique way, modeled what it meant to lead with passion, to build a true community, and to strive for the highest standards of excellence without ever losing sight of the individual student. They showed me that a band room could be a place of profound personal growth, not just musical learning. Their collective influence helped foster a love of music in me and guided me towards music as a career.

### **What advice do you have for experienced music teachers on avoiding "burning out?"**

This is such an important question, and something I think most every dedicated teacher grapples with at some point. One of the best pieces of advice I've ever heard is to constantly "Remember your Why." It's so easy to get caught up in the day-to-day minutiae of our jobs—the planning, scheduling, meetings, rehearsals, and fulfilling expectations—that we can lose sight of the reason we started in the first place. For me, it always comes back to what the band room meant to me in high school. It was a safe place where I learned about teamwork, discipline, and community. When we make a conscious effort to remember what that experience meant to us, and we work to recreate that for our own students, we can find a deep well of purpose that helps push back against burnout.

Secondly, it is absolutely crucial to make time for yourself. As educators, we are wired to give everything we have to our students and our programs, often at the expense of our own

well-being. While we should always strive for the highest level of excellence, that has to be sustainable. I encourage you to be mindful in your planning and to intentionally schedule time away from your office, your computer, and your email. Creating that balance isn't selfish; it's a necessary part of maintaining the energy and passion required for a long and healthy career.

Finally, please remember that you are not alone. Burnout often thrives in isolation, when we feel like we have to have all the answers. But we have an incredible collaborative community of music educators right here in Georgia. As a 30-year educator, I can assure you that none of us have all the answers, but someone out there can almost always help you find the one you need. Leaning on that network is one of the most powerful tools we have.

### **What are/were your favorite resources as a high school band director?**

There are so many wonderful books, teaching methods, and resources out there, and I'd be happy to talk with anyone individually if they'd like to chat about specifics—please feel free to get in touch. But honestly, the single most powerful and valuable resource for me has always been other educators. The books and methods are fantastic, but they can't replace a conversation with a trusted colleague.

Throughout my career, I've learned the most by listening to, observing, and talking with my fellow music teachers. Whether it was at a conference, during a festival, or just by picking up the phone, the willingness of others to share their knowledge was incredible. I always knew that no matter what challenge I was facing—from hundreds of topics related to teaching music to navigating non-musical issues—there was someone in our community who had likely faced it before and could offer some guidance. That network of shared experience is priceless, and it's the one I've leaned on the most throughout my entire career.

### **Is there anything else you would like to say to everyone as you begin your tenure as President?**

I just want to end by saying a sincere thank you to every music educator across our state. The work you do every day for your students, your schools, and your communities is incredibly important, and it does not go unnoticed. Your passion and dedication are the foundation of everything we do, and I am deeply grateful to be part of such a wonderful community.

As I begin my tenure as President, please know that I am here to listen and to serve you. My door is always open. If I can help in any way, if you'd like me to visit your school, or if you just want to talk, please don't hesitate to reach out. I look forward to working with all of you.

