



The music man: Band director Mark Cyra leaves his mark on La Follette

By Victoria Davis | Special to the Cap Times | May 9, 2020



Mark Cyra and Julie Sherwood help the band at La Follette High School. This has been Cyra's last before retirement. The concert was canceled as a kind of final event with his students before the end of the school year.
Victoria Davis



At 10 a.m. on a Monday, the sounds of drums, flutes would be heard in the hallway of La Follette



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stuffed with instrument cases and decorated with "Star Wars" and Indiana Jones posters — Mark Cyra, La Follette's longtime band director, sat in the clarinet section practicing "A Hymn for the Lost and the Living" along with his students.

Local trombonist Darren Sterud would be found at the front of the class, conducting the band so Cyra could play. "I tell the kids all the time that when I'm sitting in with them, it's not because I'm some incredible musician or player," Cyra said. "What I provide for them is courage to make an entrance with confidence. I always say, it doesn't matter if you make a mistake. Make it with guts."

For many months, before COVID-19 forced the schools to close their doors, La Follette's band students were prepping for what would have been their spring concert, originally rescheduled for May, which would have also guest featured local professional musicians such as David Spies and La Follette alum Jon Schipper, the music teacher at Madison Country Day. Now that concert, and Cyra's final performance before his retirement, has been canceled indefinitely.



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Darren Sterud helping the band at Lafollette High School rehearse for their Spring Concert.

Victoria Davis

“It is most certainly saddening and disappointing to
to sound too cliché, but it's almost like performing a
partway through. I think that's particularly burdens



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After 21 years of teaching at La Follette, this may not be the “closing ceremonies” Cyra was expecting leading into retirement, nor the send-off he was hoping for his seniors. But he says his final year at the high school has not been soured.

“The LHS Band Senior class and I are still going to try and get together for a Zoom meeting later this month to share the senior slideshow and announce the senior band award recipients,” Cyra said. “Plus, getting to teach alongside Darren, and watching students grow this year through winter concerts and jazz ensembles has been amazing. It makes it very difficult to leave.”

[Madison's Opera in the Park will go online this summer]

Cyra and Sterud have been co-teaching band at the school since he graduated from La Follette. Sterud has been a world traveler, performing with The Jimmys and Mama Digdown's jazz orchestra. But he says teaching with Cyra has been a highlight.

“The man is like a second father to me,” Sterud said. “I miss his classroom these days off of how he taught me.”

The team teaching is a method Cyra latched onto during his time at McFarland High School. While Mark stood at the podium, Cyra would be in the ensemble playing with the kids.



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“One of the best things you can do for your kids is model for them,” said Cyra, who has also brought in teachers from Whitehorse and Sennett Middle Schools to help teach at La Follette. “And it helps to surround them with teachers who have different tools in their musical tool kits.”

“Mark has created a really lovely working relationship and friendship between the music teachers in Madison,” added Katherine Punwar, a former music teacher at Sennett. “To say Mark is passionate about music is an understatement, and his compassion as a teacher is evident in the relationship he builds with students.”

Sterud says that music teachers have a special privilege in their ability to be a trusted confidant for those they teach, fostering a classroom environment that’s based on emotion, creativity and the acceptance of mistakes.

“For some students, a music teacher may be the only adult who truly listens to them,” said Sterud, who is being strongly pursued by the school board. “I’ve found over the years that if a kid is struggling,



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parents if there's something seriously wrong. Mark did that for me, and because of him, now I do it for my students.”

“That’s one of the reasons I went into music education,” Cyra said. “I had a very kind and supportive high school band director we all used to call ‘Uncle Bob.’ He showed me that while there’s so many unhealthy things kids can get wrapped up in high school, music is one healthy way to channel emotions and make a connection with someone else.”

After two decades of training the musicians of tomorrow and MacGyvering band uniforms when there was no one else to hem the seams, Cyra’s time as a music educator is coming to a close. Though he has not decided whether or not to step into his long-time mentor’s shoes, with Sterud, the mentorship will continue as he plays his own way to Cyra.

“Mark’s impact on this school, program and district is hard to know,” Sterud said. “The people that do this job have a unique perspective. The students and the community are better because of it. Follette.”

Though quarantine is still in effect, Sterud is hopeful for his last performance for Cyra, to show support for the educator but also appreciation for “one of the greatest music educators I’ve ever known.”

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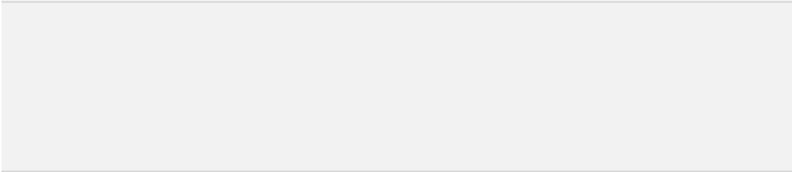
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