

Interview with JOHN BARR

Recipient of the Quebec Band Association Retirement Award, 2008

John Barr recently retired after 31 years of teaching for the Eastern Townships School Board (formally District of Bedford School Board). As one would expect, John has some stories to tell from over these years and we would like to share some of his history with you, our members.

John tells us that he did not in fact choose music: “music chose me I did not have a choice”. John studied oboe at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. He was awarded a scholarship to study at Michigan State but unfortunately had to decline as he needed to work to help support his family. He jokes that his family could not support a continual student. He does not regret his decision as he may not have met his wife Laura had he moved to Michigan.



As many of us do, John started teaching in an elementary school and remained there for the first three years of his career. There were very few resources at that time so he spent his Sunday evenings listening to the radio and writing out the music for ukulele to teach in his Monday morning classes. During this same time, he taught music appreciation classes which took place in the Town Hall while the Mayor was having his meetings in the next room. “Beethoven’s Fifth” quickly became a town favourite. Another experience that John shared is about his trip to Broadway to see the new (at the time) musical, “Chorus Line”. He obviously enjoyed the performance but laughs about coming home and writing his “first and last musical”.

After those initial 3 years, John began his lasting career at Massey Vanier High School in Cowansville, Quebec. He reflects on some of the well-known concert band repertoire that his band played: “Egmont Overture”, “Barber of Seville” and “Variations on a Theme of Haydn by Brahms”, to name a few. The band had some memorable moments such as playing for the Governor General in Ottawa and for the South African High Commissioner. More recently, John recalls performing with the McGill Chamber Orchestra under the direction of Boris Brott.

Of course, then came the Eighties when the government decided that students needed more time in Science classes. Less time in the Arts meant that things had to change so John started a jazz band. He enjoyed this as well but he missed his Concert Band. Over the next several years, Massey Vanier had 14 new principals and John found himself always trying to

convince a new person about the importance of music and that more time for a Concert Band would be beneficial. It seems that history does often repeat itself.

John has seen many changes over his 31-year career and has no regrets as he leaves to pursue other adventures. He passes along some great advice to other music teachers by reminding them “not to sacrifice your family for your career. Your workplace will forget you but your family is forever.” Maybe this is why his two boys, Nick and Chris, followed in their father’s footsteps and are very heavily involved in music. Nick and Chris have attended the QBA Honour Band events over the years and both are extremely talented musicians. Music is a family affair in the Barr household. John and Nick have now joined the *Orchestre Symphonique Populaire de Montreal* and Chris and Laura are hoping to join next season.

John ends his stories with the quip, “Long live oboists. They shall rule the earth one day”. I am not so sure about that but good luck with your dreams.

John, we wish you all the best in your endeavours. You have helped to shape a better society for your students and they will remember you for years to come. You have influenced your students more than you may realize.

Enjoy your retirement and keep playing!