

Retiree Award Recipient 2011: Joan Riley

In order to get Joan Riley to do this interview, I had to buy a saxophone from her; in fact, two; one before and one after.

Fortunately, we have worked together for 28 years, ever since she interviewed *me* for a position in her Air Force Reserves band, so it didn't seem too much to ask.

1. Where have you taught?

Joan began her teaching career at St.Thomas High School in Pointe Claire, then moved on to teach at Pierrefonds Comprehensive (P.C.H.S) in Pierrefonds and in her final year, Riverdale High School also in Pierrefonds.

2. How long have you been teaching?

She had to think about it for awhile, but she figures 37 years.

3. Why did you choose music education as a career?

As a student in the Hochelaga area of East Montreal, Joan's enthusiasm for music, combined with that of her elementary and secondary music teachers convinced her that she should pursue a career in teaching.

The school's guidance counsellor, at the time, was a trombone player, so she thought he would be very excited for her and encourage her dream to become a music teacher. What a shock, when she told him her plans, and he laughed out loud. Music teacher? Not a woman's job, since 'conductors' are men. She was so devastated that she failed everything but math and music in her final year of high school.

Her parents insisted she return to finish her diploma, and luckily during that summer, met up with another student, who told her that she was indeed studying to become a music teacher (and conductor) and why didn't Joan try it anyway? Well, that was the push she needed, and Joan did; she finished high school, and got an



early acceptance, and in the fall headed to McGill to begin her journey to becoming a music teacher.

Joan the feminist, used to sit in with the Air Force Band, who tried to convince her to join the band. She wanted to, but refused as the position for musician was called 'Bandsman' and she would have to join as a secretary, but play with the band on her own time. Within a year, they changed the position title to musician and she joined at that time, eventually becoming captain, and conductor of the 438 Squadron Air Reserve Band from 1979 to 1996.

4. Do you remember your first stage?

There was a teacher's strike, so somehow one principal took 7 teachers, at St. Patrick Elementary school, and since there was only one music room, when not teaching music, they were required to teach other subjects, which was a good experience, actually.

For the secondary stage the strike was over, she went to Marymount (now St. Luc in N.D.G.), with Andrew Homzy as a fellow student. She remembers, that band was not considered a real music option, and was only offered in early morning rehearsals twice a week, as the school offered recorder.

At the time when Québec school boards were divided along religious lines, she remembers that only Protestant schools offered band. The religion courses offered by the Catholic system took up so much time there was no room in the schedule for band. Happily, how times have changed.

5. What would you say to a Music Ed. Student today?

Get a second teachable subject. The shrinking Anglophone population in Québec, coupled with declining band/music programs, make it imperative that you be flexible and ready to teach something else that may be combined with a music post. BUT, make sure you *like* that other course. Band takes up a lot of time, so don't teach something else that takes up a lot of prep time!

Grab your secondary one students right away, get them involved, in the first month of school, get them to be the nucleus of your future band program. Band councils, public performances, and invite other subject teachers who play to be your clinicians-they can help give your beginners strong fundamentals so that they can move forward quicker.

Unfortunately getting involved in politics at school may be a necessity. You don't want to find out your position has been reduced...so.....

Get involved in Faculty Council, the Professional Development committee, and Governing Board; ie: anywhere there are financial and scheduling decisions being made.

Become a member of the Québec Band Association, or any other professional association. 'I am so glad the QBA exists, because every time we get together, we find out, that others are doing such and such, and we can talk about how projects are working for them. Music teachers can feel so isolated; you need those people around because you can get very discouraged. You may be the only one in the school, teaching a misunderstood subject-yes it is music, but it is motivation, group work etc, but it is also running a business and convincing your administration it is a valid one; all at the same time.'

Keep playing music. After working with young inexperienced musicians for a while, your pitch reference may be altered. Translation: you may forget the real world of tuning!!

Keep playing music, play or conduct adults, so you remember why you want to do this teaching thing! 'I started playing clarinet again, but only at home to get ready to go out there, so that my tuning is ready!'

Go in to school 2 weeks before school starts.

Many teachers do this; it helps if you feel you get behind in things. If you find it too hard, go for only two hours a day!! Get the secondary stuff done, school supplies, get your orders done, plan your music, copy materials, etc. so you are not completely frustrated at sitting in endless meetings for the first 3 days of school.

To the University instructors I would suggest:

Professors should visit schools which have less than ideal situations, such as schools with a high percentage of special needs kids. This is a reality for most teachers now, but the university instructors don't seem to realize it, (as I discovered when I went back to do my Licentiate in 1989).

5. Do you have any words of wisdom for someone 5 years from retirement?

I hadn't decided on a retirement date. But when I realized that I was starting to lose my temper more often, I began to plan it. Actually the hardest part is making

the decision. Once that is done, it is easy!
Make sure you have plans of what to do with your time. You don't want to be bereft.

6. Do you miss teaching?

I didn't think I would. Even thinking about answering these questions this morning before I left to come here to the Beginner Band Workshop, I was thinking, I am happy no longer teaching, I don't miss it! But once I saw Marlyne Mailhot, (Beginner Band conductor in 2012) work with the kids, I remembered, yeah, this is so much fun, teaching kids to love music! I so enjoyed watching her, it was so inspiring! I don't know how my attitude changed in just a few hours!

7. What changes do you see in students of today?

Kids are still nice to work with, but I see a lack of focus, and more entitlement. They tend to give up too easily on activities; especially if there is no instant gratification.

Maybe because they have so much choice in activities—that *do* give instant gratification. There was a time when I could leave class for 15 minutes for a meeting, put a student in charge, they would run the class, cover this, cover that, and it would have been fine.

We would even come in on weekends and have band practice, and they actually came!!

8. Do you have any mentors who influenced the way you teach?

- Peter Wilcox, my high school music teacher, an incredible man and teacher.
- Tom Talamantes, my clarinet instructor at McGill when I went back for my Licentiate.
- Cy Cooper, who many of us studied with here at Vanier College. During summer school, band was offered for the same price and time line as a math course! It was like honour band but really cheap and we even made recordings! I still have the 'vinyl' records we made!
- Her math teacher: he used to let us teach certain concepts to the class, because we were keen and learned the material very quickly. *Clearly Joan was cut out to be a teacher!*

9. Do you have any favourite moments or times that stand out in your mind?

Honour Band. The first year (2005) we did it with the QBA, I was amazed, and thought we definitely have to continue this, it was incredible.

At school I did musicals, such as "Jesus Christ Superstar" which was the most incredible one we put on.

A massed band event we did with the original band association, with lots of bands from the West Island, at the Dorval Arena, where each group played two or three pieces alone, then we played a few pieces together as a massed band.

10. What lessons did you pick up that improved your teaching?

Quincy Hilliard's Band rules (no. 1,2,3) and his enthusiasm really amazed me. (Quincy Hilliard presented at the QBA retreat in 2008).

Joan Riley is an accomplished clarinettist, pianist, and amateur bassist, and a compassionate teacher and conductor. She was also a member of the Québec Band Association in the 1970's and a founding member of the present incarnation of that organization. She is also my mentor.

Interviewed by Kate Miller