

Interview with Kathie Perrett- February 11, 2008

Ali- I'm here with Kathie Perrett. First off where and how long have you been teaching?

KP- It's my 33rd year teaching, and I'm retiring this year. I started out at Lachine High school in Lachine for two years, I spent 4 years at Roslyn elementary school, and then I spent just about 27 years at F.A.C.E., since 1981.

Ali- Were you teaching high school or elementary at F.A.C.E. ?

KP- All, elementary and high school, we start our instrumental program in grade 4, so I've been teaching grade 4 all the way up to grade 11. You can see the progress. We start them off in grade 4, and then you see them progress year after year and when you see them graduate in grade 11 they're fairly accomplished.

Ali- Why did you choose music education as a career? Did you fall into it, or did you always want to be a music teacher?

KP- I guess it was sometime in high school when I was influenced by my high school band director who I admired. I enjoyed my time there and I wanted to go into music and that was the best way to do music. I wasn't planning on doing a career in performing and that was the best way to study music and to be able to share it. That's more or less how I got into it.

Ali- Where did you do your teacher training?

KP- I went to Indiana University in Bloomington Indiana.

Ali- How do you find the differences between music education in Canada compared the United States?

KP- Well, I've been in Canada so long it's hard to compare. I didn't really teach at all in the States. I finished my degree there and ended up in Montreal shortly afterwards. I think it's varied like it is in Canada, you go from city to city, you've got different priorities, and different programs. In the Midwest states you had big band programs, and I think you still do. You have schools with huge marching bands. Music is part of the community and it's a big priority. But again like everywhere, depending on where you are, programs are being cut and the emphasis is not always on music.

Ali- Can you talk a little bit about how your teaching style has changed and been modified by your experiences?

KP- I think the longer I've taught the more I think about the student themselves, rather than about teaching a program. I think when you start off you're concerned about the

content and getting a program going, and I think especially in the last few years I've thought more about the individual student and trying to reach them, what they're getting out of it, not so much trying to teach a subject. Realizing what music does for each individual kid and what they're getting out of it more than getting the band to a particular level is important.

Ali- Have you noticed any changes in the children over thirty three years?

KP- I think society has changed over thirty-three years. Kids are a lot busier now; they have a lot more distractions. I think what we notice in music is that kids want immediate gratification so the process of practicing an instrument and going from step one to having skill on the instrument, maybe they're a little more impatient. You have to teach in smaller bits. They're not as patient or as willing to put the time in, so you have to make immediate goals to get them interested. You're competing with computers and videos and playing an instrument is a long slow process. To get them involved and to maintain their interest is a bit of a challenge. You can't be a computer game to them.

Ali- Do you have any mentors that you look up to for their teaching style?

KP- Well, I started teaching at Lachine High School and I was very lucky to meet Iwan Edwards who was a very fine teacher, and who had a very strong influence on me in terms of being very supportive and seeing the results he got. I think his style had a definite influence on me.

Ali- Do you have any favourite moments, or times that stand out in your mind as being moments that verify that what you're doing as a teacher is right?

KP- I can't say there's any really big stand out, but there have been times, say when you're standing in front of a group of grade 4 or 5 kids who are fairly new to an instrument, and all of a sudden seeing something happen. They didn't even know how to hold it [the instrument] a couple of weeks ago and now they're making sounds and playing music, and just seeing the progress. At F.A.C.E. I've been able to see that because we see them for so many years. We see kids who start from virtually nothing and then in a short amount of time they're actually making music and enjoying it and I think that when you sit back and look at that it's quite special.

Ali- What are your ideas and comments on the changes in the curriculum reform in Quebec?

KP- Well, I've had a little experience with the reform, and to be honest with you I'm not convinced that it's really working. Ideally there are great ideas there. To get kids to create and appreciate and perform is fantastic, but you need the time and the resources to do it. I find that most schools have to give up one to do the other. I know we've been struggling with that ourselves, as we're [F.A.C.E.] very performance based,

and I'm finding that you need a lot of time to do performance, to teach instrumental skills and get kids comfortable with an instrument. It's hard to do everything you want to do, such as performing in an ensemble, and on top of that spend the time you need to explore making music, and appreciating music. There's an awful lot of work involved and the schools just aren't equipped to give the time that you need to do it justice. I think that's the big problem with the reform right now. In some schools they want you to do all three [performance, creating and appreciating] and I just don't know how that's possible with the time involved. You'll have to lose something perhaps. If you want to spend time creating you'll spend a week or two on a project, and in the meantime the students are not practicing, you're not having band rehearsal, so something has to suffer somewhere. In a school where you're not dealing with the performance aspect, where you're dealing with general music in an elementary school, I think it's good to get them to do more than just learn to play the recorder, and you can experiment with music more, but I think it depends on the program that you're in. I think the biggest issue is the time. You want it [music] to be for everyone at a particular level. Perhaps the reform is good in that respect for maybe someone who is not a great performer, but has great insight in creating music. It helps you find a different aspect of their creativity.

Ali- Where do you see music education going in Quebec?

KP- I would hope that they would still maintain the performance aspect of it [music education], because that's where you're interacting most with music. If you don't have that going on, what happens at the CEGEP and University level? You don't have anyone interacting with music at that level, which you need to go into things like composition, music history or any other music field. I would hope they would be able to maintain that, because I think that's where you interact with music at the root level, [by performing]. I just don't know what's going to happen with this, as I said, I think they try to do too much. You want to do all of that, but when you're busy scrambling to do everything, you sort of do nothing, and that would be my fear, that nothing gets done by trying to do too much.

Ali- Do you have any advice for teachers in training?

KP- Be flexible! I think at a lot of schools, because there is not enough music for a full time teacher, you have to accept that you'll teach other subjects to get a full time job. Even at F.A.C.E. I've taught math, I've taught English, I've taught other subjects to fill out my schedule while there. You have to be flexible. Be open to different ideas. You have to see what the situation is in a particular school and adapt your program to the situation. I don't think you can have a rigid idea of what kind of program you have to do. Especially in Quebec, you see that schools have all different kinds of programs; depending on the situation they're in, depending on what your skills are, and sometimes depending on what the principal wants. That's an issue also; they have their

own ideas in terms of what program they want. I think you have to be flexible, be open, be adaptable and persevere. Don't give up.

Ali- Do you have any last thoughts?

KP- It's a great field to be in. Even after thirty-three years I found there were a lot of things to learn. You never get to the point where you think, "Oh, I know it all now." After thirty-three years I've found that every year was different, every year I had to adapt things, change things, you get new ideas. It's constantly progressing, constantly changing. I think it's good, especially in the last few years, with the Quebec Band Association and other music associations where you can get together with other teachers and share ideas. I think that's important, to know you're not alone. In a lot of schools you may be the only music teacher, so it's important to make contact with associations and find out what's going on and get ideas from other people and other schools. It's a constantly changing scene. It always has been. There's always something new coming up.