

Beth McElroy

HN: OK, so I'm Haley Natuck, and I'm here to talk to you about your life as a member of the Allentown band for an oral history project as a part of the Lehigh Valley Engaged Humanities Consortium. Thank you for your willingness to speak with me. Can you please state your full name and birthdate?

BM: Beth McElroy, December 23, 1987.

HN: OK. So I'd like to start off by asking you a few questions about your early life and how you became interested in music. Can you tell me a little bit about how your journey started?

BM: Sure. [04:00] I was three years old, and my brother is seven years older than me. And my mom forced him to take piano lessons. But he's more of an outdoorsy, sporty type of guy. So he never practiced at all. So I was always at the keyboard, noodling around on it. And finally, my mom said, we'll get her some lessons. So she found a piano teacher that was willing to take me at such a young age, fortunately. And I've been playing ever since. I switched over to percussion when we started band in school. I was about 10 then.

HN: What encouraged you to switch over to percussion?

BM: Well, you can't play piano in a concert band. It does happen, but it's very few and far between. And the

transition was natural because for mallet percussion, it's set up exactly like a piano. So when we had the instrument petting zoo for people to try out different instruments and decide what would be the right fit for them, I walked up right up to the bells and started playing melodies and songs. And they said, well, this would be a great fit for you.

HN: [05:00] So do you prefer playing mallet percussion? Or do you like playing (inaudible) percussion?

BM: Well, I do prefer mallet percussion. It's where I'm the happiest. But from a very young age, I very much valued versatility. And that's what I liked about percussion, as opposed to French horn or trumpet, where you're always stuck playing the same instrument, day after day and song after song. But with percussion, you get the opportunity to swap around and try new things and learn different stuff. So I really tried to challenge myself to be equally good at all of the different areas of percussion, which became a challenge, surprisingly, in college, where they're trying to force you to commit to one specialty. So people would ask you, are you a mallet player? Or are you a timpanist? And I really didn't want to say. I wanted to say, well, I try to play them all equally well. But yes, mallets are where my heart is.

HN: So you most play mallet percussion in [06:00] the band, as well, here?

BM: No, I play timpani in the band.

HN: So is there a reason why that transition happened?

BM: Yeah. So the way the band is set up is that we usually go out with 35 players on any gig. Occasionally, we get to bring more than that. But because of those numbers -- and a lot of it is space constraints -- we typically go out with three percussionists. Which is, I don't want to say unusual, but it's pretty unusual for a concert band, because the parts, the way that the songs are written, it's usually for a lot of instruments in the percussion section, for a lot of reasons. High school bands have 13, 20 percussionists, and they want to keep them busy. So if we're playing repertoire that was originally written for high schools, then there's going to be 13 percussion parts that three of us have to try to cover. But the way that we handle it, because we are set up in the style of Sousa, is that we have a bass drum and cymbal player, a snare drum player, and then one player that covers [07:00] mallets and timpani. Because primarily, with Sousa, when he wrote marches, he didn't write for timpani. He just wrote mallet stuff. And then when he wrote orchestral stuff, he primarily just wrote for timpani. So you really only need one player to cover most of that music. And then we just never really adapted for the more modern repertoire. But we do occasionally get to bring in other people, colleagues

that are my friends now. And it's always fun to work with them. So yeah. So Jamie Moyer was the timpani player when I started with the band. And he moved to Texas shortly afterwards. So that's when they asked me to step up and be the timpani player full-time.

HN: And then how did you become involved in the band?

BM: So they do an outreach program with the local high schools called the side-by-side program. And the way they invite you to do that is if you are a member of district [08:00] band or regional band in the area, and I happened to do that two years, I think, two or three years in high school. And so they invited me to come down and participate in that. And I did, which was wonderful. And a lot of the band members now remember me from that experience. And it's fun to hear their perspective and stories from that. But yeah, I also got to work with Ron for district band my senior year, as well. So when I was a senior in college, I happened to be playing a concert in Bethlehem that his wife was also performing on. So he invited me, that if I'm back in the area after I graduated, to let him know. And here I am.

HN: Can you tell me a little bit more about your journey with the band? How long you've been playing with the band?

BM: Sure. I graduated from Ithaca in 2010, and I've been playing with the band ever since. And it's been a wonderful experience, as far as [09:00] the community

that we have here and all the people. It's fun to look around the room and just, I can picture where everyone sits. And I remember learning their names and quizzing myself the first year that I was here. And over the years, developing really great friendships and relationships with everybody.

HN: And then can you tell me a little bit more about outreach? I know outreach is something that got you into the band. But can you tell me more about what you've done, outreach with the band?

BM: With the band? Sure. I really enjoy, we do these educational concerts at the beginning of November, where we invite local high schools and middle schools. And it's fun, because I teach private students. And a lot of them are in the audience for them. And sometimes, we get to pull them up and have them play on stage with us. We play with a couple of area high schools here and there. And then we do some really interesting picnics and concerts within the community. That it's fun to see all the different audiences that engage us. [10:00] Sorry. I'm going to assume everything is my fault.

HN: So if you could say one thing to somebody about the band who doesn't know about the band, what would you say?

BM: If I had to do it in one word, I would say it's tradition. That we have a really, really rich history of tradition, especially preserving the Sousa tradition.

And while I said our repertoire has grown and expanded past Sousa, beyond Sousa, at our heart, we all love playing Sousa and getting back to that rich history there.

HN: Also, I know a lot of people have vocations outside of the band, where everyone does. Do you do music as part of your vocation?

BM: Yes. I'm actually really glad [11:00] you asked. At a lot of our concerts, especially the youth concerts, they always point out, they say, everyone who has a not-music day job, please raise your hand. And the thing is that I can raise my hand if they said, if all of your day job is music, please raise your hand. And their point is to point out to kids that no matter what direction life takes you or what profession you wind up having, music can still always be part of your life. But you can also have a day job as music. And I wish that we would talk about that a little bit more. I truly am a full-time musician. I'm a musician at a church, and I'm a musician. I teach privately. And then I play in different ways throughout the community. I've played at all the local colleges, and I've played with the local symphony. So it's possible. It's absolutely doable. And I wish that we would spread that message a little bit more.

HN: [12:00] So the one thing that I have to change direction a little bit, how do you think that your experiences with music have impacted your life as a whole?

BM: That is a really hard question, mostly because, and I've obviously spent a lot of time thinking about stuff like this. You see a lot of people say things like, oh, I love music. And it just makes me think, because I can't separate life from music. It's all intertwined for me. It's the one thing that I do. I've been doing it since I was three. It's a language to me. It's very much the first language that I learned. I learned how to do it before I learned how to read English. And I couldn't function without it, certainly.

HN: And then also, [13:00] I was just curious, going back to when you were talking about starting playing. What inspired you to keep playing?

BM: Well, I won't say it wasn't a struggle, especially with me teaching little kids. I know that there was a long period of time where I wouldn't spend a whole lot of time on the piano between my lessons. But that wound up teaching me some invaluable skills, like being able to sight read and being able to work on stuff on the fly and strengthening that kind of stuff. So even without putting in the time at home, I was getting a lot out of it. As far as why I stuck with it, it was the thing that I did. That's what spoke to me. I was always involved

at my church, and I was involved with the choirs as soon as they would let me. And it was, yeah. Some kids do sports, and I just did music.

HN: And then I just wanted to end with, do you have any advice that you would [14:00] give to a musician who's just starting out?

BM: Tons. Any specific direction?

HN: Just like a musician who's struggling to keep playing.

BM: Sure. Life is about balance is the big thing. And that's a big thing with music that people who pursue music tend to go, I don't want to say overboard. But we tend to be workaholics. And we lose focus of the big picture. And the big picture is that you have to feed yourself in order to feed other people. Which is really what music is. It's a gift to other people. And if it becomes just a job for you, you'll never get the fulfilment out of it that you once did. So you have to take time to do whatever it is that feeds your soul, whether that is music-related and you're just playing music for fun, just a little bit every day, or have one side project [15:00] that feeds you. And that's something that I learned through the Allentown band because, like I said, my heart is with mallets. But I play timpani here. So this is a really fun outlet for me, and I absolutely, like I said, love the community and love connecting with the people and the history. But it

will never be the thing that is passion for me, because marimba is my passion. So that's the thing that musicians, because other people who have professions elsewhere and pursue music as an avocation, they use music as their outlet. And we often forget to find an outlet, because this is the outlet for so many other people. So that would be my main thing.

HN: Well, thank you so much for speaking with me today.

(inaudible)

F3: Oh, I would. Let me see the band going. [16:00] It's going forward in the future.

BM: New York. Yeah, we're going to go to New York again. I mean, I think that we are definitely going to continue, especially because Demkee is doing such a wonderful job of recruiting the younger generation and outreach with the youth. I would hope that we, wherever we go, that we continue to stick to our Sousa roots. I think that's the one thing that we do incredibly well and that we are really devoted to preserving. Sure. That was quick.

F3: Thank you very much.

M1: You feeling good? OK.

F3: Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you'd like to say?

BM: No. You hit all the questions that I liked.

F3: (inaudible)

M1: OK.

F3: Thank [17:00] you very much.

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