

Deb Heiney

KATE RANIERI: My name is Kate Ranieri. I'm here at Wenner Hall in Allentown, Pennsylvania, interviewing one of the Allentown Band members.

DEB HEINEY: My name is Deb Heiney.

KR: So we'd like to hear your story about your involvement with the band. If we have your permission, we will move forward.

DH: OK.

KR: All right, very good. So the first thing I want to ask you, or actually say, is thank you very much for letting us do this. We really do [00:01:00] appreciate it. So first thing we want to talk about is how you got into music in general. Like, when did you start playing an instrument? What interested you? And then [eventually?] move into the band. So I'll just let you run with it.

DH: OK. I went through the Parkland district school system. And one of my older sisters played clarinet in the band. And I always watched her practice and thought it was pretty neat, what she was doing. And so I, at the demonstration in elementary school, I decided, well, I wanted to play the saxophone. So my parents bought a saxophone, and we were off. When I got to junior high school, I also became interested in playing the bassoon. And my middle school or junior high band director was

just a wonderful person who everybody just loved playing for him and wanted to do their [00:02:00] very best. And so I learned to play the bassoon and started taking private lessons and played that through high school. And then majored in that in music education, with bassoon as my major in college. I went to Mansfield, at the time called Mansfield State College. Now, it's Mansfield University. So that was pretty much the beginning of the time that I started with music. When I graduated from Mansfield, I came back to this area and was looking for teaching jobs. And became interested in playing on the side. So I played at Moravian College for the orchestra, Muhlenberg College for their wind ensemble, and then also joined one of the community bands here in Allentown. I started with the Pioneer Band, was with them for about 11 years. And then I came over to the Allentown band. And I've been with the Allentown band since 1991.

KR: Playing bassoon?

DH: I started playing bassoon with the Allentown band, but also [00:03:00] doubled and subbed on bari sax, tenor sax, percussion, bass clarinet. And now, I'm pretty much playing bass clarinet for all of the jobs.

KR: So tell me about how the band has evolved in the last 50 years, if you can, like, 50 years ago. So anywhere you want to start.

DH: Well, let's see. I haven't quite been in this area in music for 50 years. But I can see knowing about the history of the band. There's just a very big tradition of excellence with the Allentown band. We do a lot of concerts locally, free for most of the audiences, some that are ticket-priced concerts. We also have an outreach program that we do, which that is something that's really come along just since [00:04:00] Ron Demkee's been the conductor. We started in the mid-nineties with our youth concerts, where we invite schools from basically third grade through eighth grade, students from the Lehigh Valley and surrounding areas. And we do two concerts at Allentown Miller Symphony Hall. And it's free for all of the students. They just have to transport the students to the facility. And we do a concert where Ron interacts with the students, asking questions, getting the answers from the kids. Sometimes, we have some of them come up on stage and play some percussion instruments, depending on the piece. What I do, as the education outreach coordinator, I write the lesson plans that are distributed to the schools, to the teachers, so that they can help the students know what's going to happen at the concert. I love working with those kids in that way. And [00:05:00] we get responses usually from the kids in the form of pictures that the teacher asked them to draw something that they found

interesting at the concert. And we get a lot of great responses from the kids about how they loved "The Stars and Stripes Forever," or they loved hearing, seeing an oboe for the first time. They didn't know what an oboe was. Or when they get to come up on a stage and play something, they find it interesting. Sometimes, we've had some of the ballet dancers from the Lehigh Valley. We did "Peter and the Wolf," and they did some ballet sections of that. We've had some choruses, student choruses from the Lehigh Valley. We've had some guest soloists. The kids all fall in love with whatever instrument that's being played. They want to become that person, playing that instrument in the future. So that helps to keep the interest high for students in music, but also get some of the students who have never seen an instrument like the oboe or the big-stringed bass or the [00:06:00] tuba. They don't know what a tuba is, or the different percussion instruments. So they get to see some of that. And that stirs their interest and helps to create more interest for them for participating in music. We also do a side-by-side concert for ninth through twelfth grade students. And that's for students to come in and play alongside the Allentown band members. And that we started somewhere, I believe, around 2005. And I coordinate all of the students that apply for that through high school. We sent out information about the

concerts. And then we select the students based on their resumes and what we can use in the way of instrumentation. And we have a guest conductor each time with that. We've had most of the conductors of all of the military bands. We've had some other guest soloists. Recently, we had Johan deMeij, who is an internationally known composer. So we've had a wide variety of [00:07:00] experiences for these students. There also, we get a lot of answers and information from the students about, what did they enjoy most? How did they see themselves moving on after high school playing? Do they want to do something like join the Allentown band or play in another band or play in college? And the Allentown band members help them with maybe learning some of the music, specific things about their instrument, helping them with learning some of the rhythms, or maybe some of the different fingerings for some of the notes that would help them play a little bit more smoother or better with what they're doing. So it's another experience that, something they can't maybe get in their high school, because all of the schools are limited with budgets and can't always have guest conductors and soloists come in. So we have quite a bit of experience with doing that for the students. And they really enjoy working with that. We get anywhere from about 50 [00:08:00] to 60 kids apply for that. And usually, we take around 50, 55 students,

depending on the instrumentation that we have. So that's another great experience. We always want to put out a good product as entertainment, but also be educational for the audience, as well. It doesn't matter if it's an audience at West Park. There's always somebody that maybe has never heard "The Stars and Stripes Forever." And so we make sure that every time we play that, which is always the closer for our concerts, we always want to make sure that it sounds as fresh and as excellent as possible so that people who have never heard it before can get something that they can enjoy and learn about. Some of the pieces that we've played for many, many years, some of the orchestral transcriptions that Sousa did, and other bands have done, those [00:09:00] also people haven't heard. They might have come from a ballet or might have come from an opera, and these people have never heard these before. And it's something that's different from them and something that's different than the music that they normally listen to on their CD players or iPods or whatever. So that music, some of it's been around for a long time. And we continue to do it, because one of our goals is to preserve what the American concert band has been about, as well as bring in new guest composers and conductors and work with new music and new instrumentation. But also keep the things

alive that have been done for so many years with the American concert band.

KR: When you're talking about the students who come into these educational programs, what would you say is, can you give me a sense of who's in the band?

DH: We have students that come from all of the local high schools, some of the schools in Schuylkill County, in Northampton, Lehigh, Berks, Carbon, Monroe. We've had some folks from down near Chester County and Montgomery County, Kutztown. So it's a lot of different school districts that are involved.

KR: Talk about the make-up, since we're talking about issues of demographics, about your band members, in terms of age, from who's the youngest to the oldest, the make-up in terms of ethnic, racial, gender.

DH: Sure. Well, I think our oldest person is 90. I'm not sure when he's going to be 91, but he's 90. And I think the youngest person we have is a person who just graduated from high [00:13:00] school in June of 2018. They all just love music as part of, what I always say, making a life, not making a living. When we do get paid for our concerts, it's not a huge amount of money. It can be a supplement to somebody's income, but also, it's just something a little extra that people can look forward to. But I think the real reason that people are in the bands are because they just love playing and love

sharing that with an audience, making them happy. They have a hobby that they can enjoy doing. Something that also, I know for some people, they spent so many years in their school system playing their instrument, they didn't want to give that up. They practiced a lot and got their skill level to a really excellent level of ability. And want to share that and just keep on doing it as part of something that makes them happy.

KR: As you think about the future for the band, what are your [00:16:00] prognostications, if you will? What do you think the band, is going to happen to it? How's it going to grow or not, or change?

DH: as long as we continue to have an audience who wants to hear us, we will be playing. And financially, I think we're fairly stable with what we need. We always work on getting grants, especially for our outreach programs. And we have 31 years of CDs that we've recorded. Some of them are just CDs with marches on it, just featuring Sousa and other great composers of marches. Our most recent one was John Williams, to celebrate his eighty-fifth birthday. So we did a lot of his movie music and some of his other music. We've done some of just Pennsylvania composers. So we've done some things that are educational as well as just entertaining. And like we always say, Ron always says to the audiences, you can take the Allentown band home with you. If you enjoyed

the concert, purchase a CD. So we have that as another outreach, really, to the community, because we're showing them what we've done. So I think that through our publicity campaigns, our educational outreach, we've played at the Kennedy Center. We've played at Carnegie Hall. In fact, we're going back there next April. We do a holiday concert helping to bring recognition to the veterans that are in the area. We do a dinner concert the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, which, to me, is always the kick-off for my holiday season, where people are enjoying a dinner while we entertain through our music. And Ron Demkee has a great vision for what the band can do and is doing, and what we should be doing as a community band. Not just entertaining people but educating as well as just letting people know that, hey, we're here in Allentown. And we've got something good going here.

KR: Thank you so much.

END OF AUDIO FILE

