

**George Kirschner**

KR: All right. My name is Kate Ranieri. I'm here with George Kirschner. It's July 26, 2018, and we're here in -- is it Wenner Hall?

GK: Wenner Hall, yes

KR: In Allentown, Pennsylvania. This is the home of the Allentown Band.

GK: It is, indeed.

KR: Thank you very much for being here with us and for agreeing to be interviewed, to give us a sense of your life history with the band, if you will. If you could just state your name and your date of birth for us, please.

GK: All right, my name is George, [01:00] middle initial A, Kirschner, and I was born September 8, 1942.

KR: Thank you. So one of the first things we'd like to talk to you about, because you are a member of the band, is to go back in time and to think about your early years with music. What got you interested in music? And from there we can kind of move forward, but let's begin with a little bit of when George was a wee one.

GK: OK, when George was a wee one, there were a lot of Sunday school picnics in our area. I grew up over in York County, York, Pennsylvania, and often on a Saturday night the entertainment was we would go to a Sunday school picnic,

and they always had a band playing there, and I just enjoyed band music, and that's how I became interested. And finally I think it was in fifth grade when I finally started playing the trumpet. I always wanted to play the trumpet, and my [02:00] music teacher was my uncle, who also happened to be the director of the Glen Rock Band in Glen Rock, Pennsylvania. And so I started taking lessons from him, and I think it was in eighth grade when he finally invited me to come in and become a member of the Glen Rock Band. So I started going to rehearsals with the Glen Rock Band and started playing Sunday school picnics in the summer and some concerts in the winter and all that sort of thing. And then moved into junior high and high school and played all the way through junior high and high school. And then when I graduated high school, I went to Susquehanna University, where the band director was Jim [Steffey?], and Jim asked me if I would like to become part of the symphonic band. So for four years I was part of Jim Steffey's symphonic band at Susquehanna. [03:00] And an interested sidelight, when you were at Susquehanna, to get credit in the music department, you had to be a music major. I was a biology/chemistry major. So Jim asked me my junior year, he said we need one other trumpet, because we're having the course on brass choir this semester.

Would you be willing to do that? And I said well, it's my junior year. I have like four science courses, including organic chemistry. I said I'll do it if you can get me the one credit for that. So he went to the president. So in my Susquehanna years, I have one credit in the music department, (laughs) and I can thank Jim Steffey for that.

KR: So tell me, why the trumpet?

GK: I don't know. I know when I was a kid and we went to [04:00] Sunday school every Sunday, we had a Sunday school orchestra. And I just enjoyed watching the guy, who happened to be in the Glen Rock Band, play trumpet, and I thin, that's how I became interested in playing the trumpet. So that's how I got hooked on that. I never played any other instruments. I never played piano or anything like that. So that's how I got started.

KR: And so you graduated from Susquehanna --

GK: Right, went to Susquehanna, graduated there. Then I went to Virginia to the Medical College of Virginia, where I went to dental school. And when I was in dental school, I didn't touch the horn. I was too busy doing other things, learning how to fix teeth. And after we finished dental school, I wanted some additional training. At that time, the military were full of dentists. They didn't need any other dentists, [05:00] so I applied to what at that time

was called a rotating dental internship. And Allentown Hospital was one of the few private hospitals that had a dental internship. So I applied, and low and behold, I was selected to be the one intern at Allentown Hospital from '70 to '71, and that's how we ended up in Allentown. And once I got to Allentown -- I'll give you a little more history. When I was young, in teenage years, my uncle, who was my music teacher, would often take me to Hershey Park, because at that time, Hershey Park was an open park. You could come in and just buy tickets to a ride or whatever, but in the summer Hershey Park had band concerts every Sunday afternoon and evening in a beautiful park-like setting in Hershey Park. And what Hershey Park did [06:00] is they rotated between the Allentown Band, the Ringgold Band of Reading, the Pottstown Band from Pottstown, and the Spring Garden Band from York. So frequently on a Sunday we would go to Hershey Park, often to hear the Allentown Band, because we were familiar with Bert Myers, the director, and his legacy and the legacy of the Allentown Band. So when I finished dental school and came back to Allentown and started practicing dentistry -- actually it was in my internship here -- I had contacted Jim Steffey again, my former band director, and I told him I'd be interested in perhaps joining the Allentown Band if he had any pull with

Burt Myers. So Jim apparently wrote a letter to Bert, and one Sunday evening, I think it was in April, my wife and I were at home, phone rings, and it's Bert Myers. And those of you [07:00] that don't know Bert Myers, he was a rather Dutchified gentleman, and he called me and said would you like to come to rehearsal tomorrow evening? And I said gee, I'd love to. So at that time the band was rehearsing in the Franklin Fire Company, downtown Allentown, where they rehearsed for many years before we moved to this location. So interesting thing, that evening Burt said we're going to have a fellow here that's going to bring a bunch of marches for us to play. I thought OK, I've always loved marches, because I marched in the Glen Rock Band and the high school band, even with the Susquehanna Band. And so the gentleman that he had that evening, his name was Robert [Hoe?]. Bob Hoe was from Poughkeepsie, New York, and he owned a bunch of bowling alleys, but he was just into band march music. And Bob would actually go to Washington, go into the Library of Congress, dig out [08:00] old composers of marches which were never published, hand write the parts, bring them to the Allentown Band, and we would play these marches. In fact, we made several records for Bob of some of these marches that have never been published, probably never played

before and maybe never played since then. But that was my first experience with the Allentown Band, going on the third floor of the Franklin Fire Company, finally sitting in with the band that I had been in awe of several times and seeing them in Hershey, Pennsylvania. So that was the spring of '71, and that summer I maybe played, oh, a few concerts maybe with the band, and then finally it was early August, and one day I was in my office -- this was after I had finished my internship, I was in practice -- and Bert Myers calls me and says would you be able to play Kutztown on Sunday? Kutztown Day is a day in Kutztown [09:00] where every summer the whole day is spent with games and Bingo and band concert, and at that time we played four concerts at Kutztown, two in the afternoon and two in the evening. So obviously I said yes, I'll be able to play. So that was my first real experience of playing with the band on a rather regular basis. And a lot of the music I had never rehearsed, because we rehearse things at rehearsal, but when you're playing four concerts you don't have time to rehearse the four concerts. So I was sight-reading a lot of the music at that time, but that was my first experience where I started playing on a pretty regular basis. And then from there on, I started to play almost every job

after that. So now here we are. It's been 47 years since I've been playing in the band.

KR: Forty-seven years, there's a lot of stuff that's happened since then, right?

GK: [10:00] There sure is.

KR: Anything that sticks out to you that, you know, as far as the band in terms of how things have changed with the band itself, your audience, the music you've played, maybe even some stories that you think are just like these are really great stories so that we have a whole --

GK: Well, of course when I started in the band, the Allentown Band was still playing a lot of Sunday school picnics, and we played down in Lancaster County, Berks County, and when we went on those jobs, we would usually take a bus. And at that time, the only woman in the band was Dorothy Canalis, who played harp. It was strictly a men's organization at that time. Bert had never had any women in the band except Dorothy, who was the harpist. And we would take bus trips. So we would get on the bus at the band hall and head down somewhere in Lancaster County, [11:00] Berks County to play a Sunday school picnic, and then on the way back you had to cut your way through the cigar smoke on the bus. I was one of the few people in the band, I think, that didn't smoke. But it was a time for me to kind of get to know some of the

members of the band, you know. And these are guys, as I said, that had seen on the stage at Hershey Park, and now I'm part of them, so it was kind of interesting to get to know them. Once in a while we would stop at a local watering hole maybe on the way back for a little liquid refreshment after a concert on a Saturday night, but that was part of the comradery of the band. At that time, there was a gentleman who was involved with the Pennsylvania Railroad down on the main line at Philadelphia, and the Saturday after Labor Day, he always had a big party for people that were involved with the railroads [12:00] and all that sort of thing, and invited the band to come down there and play. So we would sit there by the pool and play a couple of concerts, and we would be able to have anything to drink we wanted, and they had food there, and that was always an interesting experience as well. So you said have things changed? Yeah, of course the personnel have changed tremendously. At this point in time, I think we're almost 50% female. There are a lot of women in the band. After Ron became the director, he started to invite females to join the band, and so I think we're about 50/50 on male/female in the band. And we've also brought in more young people, which we're trying to do. Ron's trying to continue the legacy, because some of us are getting older.



But that certainly has changed over the years. Our audiences have changed. I don't even think we play any Sunday school picnic [13:00] anymore. We continue to play here at West Park about four or five times a year, play at Miller Symphony Hall, of course, several times a year, but our audience has changed. When I first became a member of the band, when we would play a concert at West Park, West Park was full. The benches were filled with the people, people would bring lawn chairs and sit behind the benches, and nowadays when we play there, we still get an audience, but it's certainly not what it was back in the '70s and early '80s. So that has changed.

KR: Can you identify the makeup of your audience? I mean, is it mostly older people or younger people? Is it people like from downtown or...?

GK: Well, it's an older audience. There's no doubt. You know, we still attract the older audience. And most of the people, I would say, are not from downtown Allentown, because the [14:00] topography of Allentown has changed over the years, and very few of those people show up for our concerts. It's mostly the people, some from Allentown or the suburbs that know the band and know the legacy of the band that tend to come to our concerts.

KR: What I've read -- and I'm asking you to say yea or nay and elaborate -- but in the sense of that a lot of your programming has changed in your outreach, different projects that you have, so can you speak to that?

GK: Well, you know, our theme is we're the Allentown Band with the Sousa sound, and what John Philip Sousa used to do, when he programmed numbers, he would usually program an overture or some symphonic interpretation as the opening number and then he would play something other things, but after a big number, [15:00] he would turn around the audience, acknowledge the crowd with a bow, and he would turn around and raise the stick and boom, they're starting to play a march. And of course, he would always let the band know, and Ron does the same thing. He will say OK, we're going to play Semper Fidelis after this number. And he always wants us to have that march book ready to go when we finish that number. We have two march books. We have a red march book, which is all Sousa marches, and then we have a blue march book, which is marches from lots of other composers. And sometimes on some jobs we'll have both march books available. And a lot of people, when we're at a concert or out in a venue somewhere, a lot of people will request a certain march, so if we have it in the book, Ron will usually accommodate them and play the march. I'm

sorry, you asked me a little bit -- elaborate [16:00] more on the question there.

KR: About the kind of programming you do besides just -- and I don't mean just as a dismissive sort of thing -- but besides playing, you also have some educational outreach?

GK: Right, we do. Yes. Ron has started in the fall we always have a program where we invite students to come into Symphony Hall, and we play a concert with them kind of as an orientation of the music, and Ron will usually talk to them about what we're playing, sometimes demonstrate the different instruments in the band, and then we will actually play a segment of a number to demonstrate a certain passage or certain instruments, and then usually at the end of that we'll play the whole selection for the kids. And it's kids that are brought in from the surrounding schools, so they bring those into Miller Symphony Hall, and then we do the concert. We usually do two of those, one like at 10:00 and one at 11:30 or 12, [17:00] so we have to do two concerts for the kids at that time. And then the other thing we've done, or Ron has done, is we now have what we call a Side-by-Side concert, which is usually in late April, early May, where we invite 50 high school students from the surrounding high schools to come in and sit aside of us while we play a concert.

What happens is we usually play the first half of the concert and then we'll have the students sit in with us for the second half. Now we rehearse with them. One night we'll go down to Symphony Hall, we'll rehearse with them, so it's not cold turkey for them when they're seeing the music. And their band directors have provided them with the music and rehearsed it with them as well. So we do that as well. And usually at those concerts, Ron will have a guest conductor, and he will always have a soloist. This past year we had Virginia Allen, whose father was the [18:00] director of the United States Army Band. In fact, she was also involved with the Army Band up at West Point. And we had a gal that plays tuba in the Philadelphia Symphony, Carol [Jannich?], who plays tuba, and she played a tuba solo. So the kids, I think, were pretty impressed by hearing this young lady play a tuba solo. So we do that outreach, you know, and we try to extend ourselves if we possibly can. We're willing to play at nursing homes and that sort of thing, which we have done, because as I say, the old Sunday school picnics, they no longer exist. So we've tried to find other venues where people are interested in concert band music.

KR: Where do you see the band going?

GK: (laughs) Well, next April we're going to go back to Carnegie Hall. [19:00] We've been to Carnegie Hall twice, and we've also been to the Kennedy Center, and next April we've been invited to come back to Carnegie Hall again. And if you've never been to Carnegie Hall to hear a concert, I don't care what you're hearing, you should go there to hear it, because the acoustics in that place are absolutely phenomenal. I'll never forget the first time we played at Carnegie Hall, Sue [Maul?] was at that time our harpist, because Dorothy had retired. And Sue, when she would be with us -- and we don't have a harp with us all the time -- but when Sue would be with us, she would always have an amplifier so she could amplify the harp a little bit when she was playing. And Sue found out she didn't need an amplifier in Carnegie Hall. The acoustics are that phenomenal. So that's scheduled for next year. As far as where the band is going to be heading, Ron is trying to bring in new bodies [20:00], new people that move into the area or maybe kids that went to school here, and they're back. And so the legacy of the band, he's really trying to continue to pursue that, and concert band music, of course, in the late 1800s, early 1900s, that was the show in town, that was the only show in town. But we're no longer the only show in town, and that's shown by the fact that we

don't get the audiences that we used to. But I think the concert band, the history of the concert band throughout history in the United States, especially what Sousa did with his band, and Gilmore, and a couple of the other big name musicians that had bands at that time -- I think that needs to be perpetuated, and I think with what we're doing, I think that's going to continue to hopefully pursue that legacy.

KR: Even though the weather was unpleasant -- it was [21:00] dangerous in some respects -- for the fourth of July, your guest conductor drew a lot of people (inaudible).

GK: It really did, yeah. It's unfortunate that we had to play that inside rather than outside at the pavilion there, but what Ron had had Johann [Demay?] do was composed a number for us on the 190th anniversary of the Allentown Band, and we did the premiere that night, July 4, with Johann Demay conducting. And like every new piece of music, whenever we get a new piece of music I look at it, and we'll play through it, and I think oh, boy, I don't know if I really like this thing, but the more you play it, the more you rehearse it, it kind of becomes part of you, and that's just I think my feeling, and I think a lot of people feel that way about the new music, especially some of the more modern music, because we'll have these weird tempo changes

back and forth all the time, [22:00] and you really need to be on your toes to be able to follow the beat and be able to adjust to these various tempo changes as we play. But that was a tremendous number that he had written. It's still in our book. I know Ron has it scheduled for one or two other performances this year, and it's going to be published, so that's great. That's super.

KR: Tony and I were there. I loved it. I thought it was (inaudible). But all of us were there for the practice. That was (inaudible).

GK: Well, that's good. Yeah, as I said, whenever you get a guest conductor, you never know what he's going to do and that sort of thing. And the interesting thing was, what did you notice about him?

KR: The different style.

GK: Yeah, but he conducted with which hand?

KR: (inaudible)

GK: The left hand. He was a left-handed conductor, which is unusually. I think that's the first left-handed conductor I've ever played under, but that was kind of [23:00] interesting. Most guys are right-handed.

KR: Questions from my colleagues? Anything else? Tony?  
[Ellen?] This has been so much fun. (laughter)

GK: I've enjoyed it, I really have. You know, just as I said, my history with starting out, you know, as a little country boy in York County and seeing the band when I was a kid and now being able to play with them for 47 years has just been, you know, an honor for me. And I don't play all of the jobs, because we have other things to do as well, but Ron is pretty accommodating, you know, if we have someplace we're going to be on vacation or something, we can fill in, and that's the nice thing about being able to rehearse where we're now rehearsing is that we can bring in some more personnel so Ron can tap into other individuals [24:00] to cover a part and that sort of thing. It depends on where we're playing. Sometimes there may be four cornets, four trumpets, five trumpets, or six trumpets. So sometimes we have to adjust as well, if there are, say, five of us and we need a sixth part covered, we'll shift parts around so that we can cover all the parts, especially on some of these bigger numbers where certain things need to be played, and if they're not played, it's obvious that they're missing.

F1: I had a question. Obviously, you've had your profession. What would you say to a young person who might -- as you said, this isn't as much of a presence, and everybody doesn't know about it at their Sunday school picnics as you



did, you know, when you were young -- what would you say to a young person? What did it bring to you? What does it enhance? What do you enjoy about it to make this be something that obviously it's a big commitment with the practice, the rehearsals, the travel, [25:00] and you were doing this while you were in practice? What is the enhancement? What do you love about it? What drives you to do it? What are the benefits that come from it?

KR: The rewards.

F1: The rewards.

GK: The rewards. (laughs) Well, for me, it was a chance to get out, when I was obviously practicing, you know, I mean that was an intense day as you're working, treating patients, and that sort of thing, so for me it was a way to walk away from where I was making my living and just be able to enjoy myself. I often tell young people that, you know, I love music as an avocation, but I don't think I would want to try it as a vocation. To be a professional musician, I said you need two things. You need lots of luck, and you need to be very, very good to be able to make it in a symphony orchestra or a combo group or something like that. But for me, it's just a chance to [26:00] kind of let off steam, you know. Forget about what's going on over there and just concentrate on that music, so it kind of changes

your mindset a little bit. I don't know if that's answering your question, but that's how I feel. As I said, you know, and of course in the Allentown Band we have numerous individuals that currently are or have been directors, Ron being of course one of them having directed the Freedom High School band. So we do have people that music has been their life as well, you know, and that's great. But as I said, professional musicians are working when we're partying, you know, basically. It's a real time commitment for those people. For me, it was a chance to kind of let my hair down and put the mirror and explorer away and go pick up the horn and do my thing.

KR: You're a retired dentist.

GK: Yes, ma'am.

KR: So people have other roles or people who work in -- [27:00] can you kind of give me off the top of your head, where do people come from? Not necessarily companies, but are they teachers or --

GK: You mean that play in the band?

KR: Mm-hmm.

GK: Well, I'm the only dentist. We also have a physician. Ken [Rider?] is a physician in the band who's a Muhlenberg graduate, by the way. And Ken's in the band. The fellow that used to sit right next to me when I got in the band,

name was Dick Detweiler, and he was an auto mechanic. He worked at Key Pontiac over in Bethlehem was where Dick worked, and Ezra Wenner, who's the senior member of the band right now who will also be interviewed, Ezra worked at Air Products. And so a fellow who used to play oboe in the band, he also had a garage down on Coopersburg. He was an auto mechanic. So we come from all sorts of things. Like I said, we have quite a number of [28:00] music teachers in the band. Kim Seifert was involved with banking, you know. So we have all sorts of vocations that are part of the mix of the Allentown Band.

KR: Thank you very much. This has been wonderful.

GK: Have I answered all your questions?

KR: I just have one last question. It's this little thing that I do, I suppose, but if you had a message you wanted to send out to young people today, whether it's at Muhlenberg or Susquehanna, something about music or being in the band, anything you'd like to stake a claim, this is how I feel about...

GK: Oh, gosh. Well, as I said, for me, just being able to get away from the profession when I was working eight hours or so a day and just being able to pick up the horn, it was my way of relaxing, even though when I'm [29:00] playing, you know, and Ron's directing, we're under the gun. We want to

try play that as well as we possibly can, but it was a different kind of pressure than being in practice. And for me, that's the thing that I would recommend to young people. You know, if you're playing an instrument, don't quit after high school. Keep playing it, even if you're just playing in the basement or in your private room or something like that. My wife is a violinist, and she hadn't played for years, and she now plays in the Allentown Pops Orchestra and Moravian College Community Orchestra. She's gotten back into music, and as I said, we both love it. We'll go to a concert once in a while ourselves, because we really enjoy it, and I would encourage young people, even though you're not going to make it your profession, at least keep it in the back of your mind and in your heart, and I think [30:00] it's going to help you. I really do.

KR: Thank you very much.

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