

by Gary Barton

“It’s been a wonderful ride! If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn’t change a thing.” If this statement sounds like part of a retirement speech, it’s because it or some variation of it is quite often heard when one of our own “pulls the plug” after a long and rewarding career. We are fortunate to be part of a profession that brings many layers of satisfaction because we came to it because of our passion for music and teaching rather than a need to just make a living.

Upon retiring in 2014 after thirty-seven years as a band director, I immediately became involved in other parts of my school district as a substitute teacher and test administrator, as well as staying as active with bands as much as possible. I’m in a school almost every day, so much so that I say that I’m in my forty-first year of teaching, but I happened to retire after year thirty-seven. Would I “...*change a thing*...”? I must say yes, many things. Instead of writing about the good things that my career has brought me, I’m going to discuss a few things that I would do differently. Some are mistakes, some are oversights, but all are things that I wish I could magically get a “do-over”. These are my regrets as well as suggestions to those who are just beginning their careers.

Stay in Shape on Your Instrument

There were times during my career when I played pretty well, but I always had long periods when I didn’t play my tuba at all. I taught some beginner classes every year of my career and I played in those classes everyday, but I tended to play woodwinds or trumpet or trombone because it is easy to walk around the classroom with those instruments. I fooled myself into thinking I was in shape. After retirement, I pledged to play my tuba everyday and get back in shape. I have kept that pledge, but I still don’t feel as if I’m where I was when I was at my best. The best way to avoid this frustration is to simply play your instrument as often as possible. Our first path to musical expression is our own instrument. This is how we learn intonation and tonal sensitivity. This is where we learn to make a beautiful phrase. I wish I had played my tuba everyday.

Study Conducting

Musical expression is developed on your instrument but conducting is how we communicate that expressiveness to others. I wish I had studied conducting, had my conducting evaluated, for two reasons: to refine my presentation of my musical ideas and to be sure that my gestures were as clear as possible. Weekend conducting symposiums and summer workshops are very good, but I wish I had pursued regular lessons with a local university conductor, perhaps a choral conductor as well. If this isn’t possible for you, is there a public school teacher nearby whose work you admire? Public schools have many fine conductors who can serve as conducting mentors.

Keep Up With Technology

When I started teaching there was not a single computer in the school district. By the time I retired every student carried around a school-issued computer. With progress there were many bumps in the road and I took the stance that it was a waste of time because things weren’t always effective and often didn’t work. In my final year I was still only doing the technology that was required. The result is that now I have to ask for help with computer applications that are routine with most people. There is an abundance of technology available for use in education. If you don’t stay in tune with it, you won’t be able to make decisions about what works and what doesn’t and others will be deciding for you.

Know When to Take it to the Repair Shop

Once I start a job I have to finish it. This admirable trait has backfired on me and created many embarrassing and expensive moments. I have created major damage to instruments when the initial problem was minor. I finally created the personal rule that if I break it, I pay for it. Your ability to diagnose and even help with repairs will improve throughout your career but when in doubt, call a professional.

Eliminate Photocopying Music

Unless permission to copy has been granted by the copyright holder, copies are illegal. Scanning and sending copyrighted music is illegal. I managed to curtail my copying in the last years of my career, but I have been guilty many times. Teach your students to care for original parts. Follow through with your expectations. If money is the problem, take a hard look at your budget. Perhaps you could eliminate one flag change?

The Only Rules Should Be Rules That You Can Keep (comfortably...)

Before making any rule, imagine a scenario in which you must enforce it. If there is any flexibility in the rule, make that flexibility part of the rule. Think through all of the possibilities. I made rules, stuck to them no matter what, and sometimes regretted it. At the end of an altercation, a parent told me, "Mr. Barton, you may want to consider humanizing your rules." She was right.

More Talking To People, Less Talking About People

We all know that we should be careful what we put in writing, whether on paper or electronically; once it's out there it's too late. The same can be true verbally, only worse. What you say will be repeated, only every time it's repeated it may be embellished. If you don't want it repeated, don't say it. I've known three gentlemen who have received the highest compliment: "If you hear that he said something bad about someone, it's a lie, because he doesn't talk about people."

Maintain Bridges

Try to make every relationship end, if it must end, positively. If a student leaves your program on a negative note, you can still speak to him or her in the cafeteria and you can still have pleasant greetings for the parents at the grocery store. Burned bridges with former teachers, colleagues, or administrators will cause regret eventually. Disagreements do not have to create finality in relationships. If you have burned bridges, it's never too late to at least try to improve the relationship. I have mended some relationships, but I have more work to do.

Learn from my mistakes. I have dealt with each thing I have discussed. Some are professional miss-steps, and some are interpersonal. I have loved my career and maybe my sharing some of these things will help you have less things you would change, when the time comes, if you could do it all over again.

Gary Barton retired from the La Porte, Texas Independent School District after thirty-seven years of teaching in five states. He received the Bachelor of Music Education from the University of Louisiana-Monroe and the Master of Science in Education from Indiana University. A Past President of the Arkansas School Band and Orchestra Association and Past 2nd Vice-President of the National Band Association, he has written for numerous publications and has done clinics and presentations in sixteen states.