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EDITOR'S PICK

TOP STORY

Carlisle

Carlisle High School Band members mourn the loss of accomplished band director

Tammie Gitt The Sentinel Jun 15, 2018

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Clyde Barr thought Carlisle was a friendly community, a good place to start his career after graduation from West Chester State Teachers College.

“I’m happy to say that things went well,” he told the Cumberland County Historical Society in a September 2017 interview.

Ask anyone who marched in his bands at Carlisle High School or played in his orchestras for the Sound of America.

To say that things went well is an understatement.

Upon hearing the news that Barr died Thursday morning after a short illness, students shared their memories of a man many called an encourager, a musician and a friend.

"I am honored to have known Clyde Barr and had his influence help to shape my own musical journey. He will certainly be missed even while his contributions to the lives of so many of us will remain alive and well," current Carlisle High School band director Byron Mikesell said.

Information about memorial services for Barr was not available as of Sunday morning.

Changing the culture

David Rohrer, who served as band director from 1982 to 2012, conducted the interview for the historical society in which Barr recalled that the band was small when he arrived in 1961. It had less than 48 members, and had rarely been challenged. Barr told Rohrer he faced opposition from students who still wanted to do things the old way while he wanted to improve the band's culture.

"In about four years, I changed the attitude of the band into 'Let's be as good as we can be,'" he said.

Former Carlisle Borough Councilman Perry Heath, who remained close to Barr after high school, said Barr was an inspiration.

"He had an ability to get more out of you than you thought you had in you. He always raised the bar higher than you thought you could achieve," he said.

A sense of discipline went hand in hand with raising the bar. Former Carlisle Mayor Kirk Wilson said that's what made Barr's bands as good as they were. To be part of the organization, musicians had to step up.

"If your music had to be memorized by Wednesday, Thursday was too late," Wilson said.

Yet, Barr did this with remarkable patience.

"He never yelled at you, but he gave you 'the look.' When he looked over the top of his glasses at you, you knew you better improve," he said.

Getting the best out of his musicians meant 7 a.m. practices before school, and sometimes in the evenings after dark. Parents would their cars pull up along the field, pointing their headlights inward so the students could see as they marched. More often than not, they heard Barr's catchphrase of "One more time!"

That dedication led to success locally, regionally and nationally, and gained the attention of the organizers of the World Music Festival in Kerkrade, Netherlands, in 1970. In his interview with Rohrer, Barr said they accepted the invitation to go to Europe to compete with bands from around the world even though the possibility was met with some degree of skepticism.

"No one on the school board or anybody else thought we would actually meet the financial goal necessary or actually go on the tour. We did," he said. "The school board and a lot of the upper administration called it 'Clyde's Folly,' and, I guess, in a sense it was."

Folly or not, the 1970 trip ended with the Carlisle High School Band bringing home the title of World Championship Show Band.

Members of that band still get together for reunions, and the Clyde M. Barr Scholarship Fund scholarship grew out of those reunions, Heath said.

“It was a lifetime experience for me. It was 11 countries in 31 days,” he said.

For all the accomplishments his band achieved, Barr tended not to take the credit himself.

"He always credited his students for the successes. He just guided them to their end results," Rohrer said.

Barr left Carlisle High School in 1977 after 16-years in the band program first as the assistant director and then as the director.

“That seems like a long time, but in a lifespan it’s only a portion,” he told the Historical Society.

After school

After he left the school district, Barr stayed active as a music educator, most visibly through his work with Sound of America, an audition-based program in which student musicians perform in a series of concerts during a goodwill tour of Europe.

Karen Bruce of Enola was a student at a high school in the Poconos area when she decided to join Sound of America in 1984.

“He was just the nicest, kindest man,” she said. “Everybody just respected him so much. They just wanted to do their best for him always.”

She remembered an incident during the tour when her bus broke down as they went through the Alps. It was a beautiful summer day so the students were wearing shorts, but there was still snow in the mountains. Though he usually rode on that bus, Barr and his wife, Lyn, had gone ahead to make arrangements for the band at their next stop.

The students waited several hours for repairs to be completed, missing dinner in the process. When they arrived at the destination long after all the other buses, they discovered that the Barrs had arranged a special dinner for them.

“It was just this little special touch. They were just so sweet taking care of us and making sure everything was good,” Bruce said.

Mikesell met Barr when he auditioned for Sound of America. Barr not only gave him the chance to perform a solo, but also provided some financial assistance to make the trip possible. The tour took the group through Germany, Austria, Italy, Switzerland and France, where they experienced standing-room only concert venues, sightseeing and cultural experiences that were designed by the Barrs.

"I will always remember our pre-trip rehearsal days at Dickinson College. I was privileged to have experienced rehearsals and performances under a number of great conductors through my high school career. My experience with Mr. Barr as our SOA director was probably even more demanding than many of the festival experiences. It was clear throughout rehearsals that he wanted the ensemble to be a great representation of our work together, but while we were on tour, it was also evident that he took a great degree of pride in presenting excellent performances abroad that represented the United States of America and its young musicians in the best possible light," Mikesell said.

When Barr's daughter, Terri, joined the high school band, Barr met the man holding the position he once owned and offered his support.

"They were very supportive. Whatever our direction was going to be, they were going to support that," Rohrer said.

Barr also continued to travel with the Carlisle High School Band thanks to his travel agency, Educational Travel Experience. Rohrer first started using the agency to arrange each of his band's trips, and Mikesell continued the practice when he arrived. Each experience was memorable for the students, and Barr remained proud of the work of Carlisle High School musicians.

"His years as director were great years and they accomplished so many things," Rohrer said, adding that Barr was "so happy" to be part of the band's success during Rohrer's years.

Through those years the two became close friends, even to the point of spending Christmas and Easter together. This tendency toward lasting friendships seems to be another of Barr's qualities as both Heath and Wilson remained close to their former teacher through the years. Both considered him a father figure.

"That's a term that probably hundreds of kids would use, but it's certainly true for me," Heath said.

Wilson said he considered Barr a musician, a band director, a music teacher and one of his best friends. Barr also served as the chairman of six out of seven of Wilson's mayoral campaigns. His diligence and dedication left its mark.

"Clyde never took any job lightly. He was focused on it. He was the one that went to bed late and rose quite early. I don't know how he did it," Wilson said.

Barr repeatedly pointed back to his students during his interview with Rohrer. He wanted them to learn they could set goals and achieve them if they worked hard enough. He considered himself fortunate to have been their teacher, and followed the successes of alumni throughout their careers.

In that, it could be said he considered himself a winner.

"I had a very rewarding time here in Carlisle. It is one of the best decisions I ever made to come and to stay and to serve," he said.

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