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Hitting the high notes

Meet the women behind two of mid-Michigan's best orchestras

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Measured by the numbers, Dorothy McDonald and Marilyn Kesler have unarguably led successful careers.

Kesler has been the director of the Okemos High School Orchestra for more than 40 years; McDonald has led East Lansing school orchestras for more than 30.

They have trained thousands of young musicians, with an unusually high number going on to professional careers in orchestras and universities around the globe.

Together, they boast a combined total of nearly 600 unused sick days. Together, they are retiring.

The two friends are being honored with farewell concerts. McDonald's was Saturday. Kesler's is at 2:30 p.m. June 8 in the Okemos High School auditorium.

"When you look at the number of students who have gone on to music careers, the number is high," said Tanya Ell, a 1996 Okemos graduate who plays cello in the Cleveland Orchestra. "But those numbers are tiny in comparison to the people who have been able to lead lives filled with the appreciation of music. That is the legacy."

Marilyn Kesler: 'Mama K' nurtures musicians

OKEMOS — The music teacher steps to the podium and raises her baton. Fifty string players straighten in their chairs, instruments poised, eyes partly on the music before them and partly on the woman demanding their attention.

Remember the emotion, she tells them. Don't just play, but play like you mean it. Her arms lift and lower, and the students begin. The music of "The Last Spring" by Edvard Grieg starts softly, like the rustle of new leaves. The sweet strain of violins mixes with the sonorous depths of the cellos and an anchoring undertone from a row of bassists in the back.

The room swells and sways. The music rises and falls. Until the teacher waves her hands. "The emotion," she says again. "It is a visual thing. Seniors, think about this, your last spring. But try not to cry."

This time she is satisfied, taking them through the entire piece. The students meet her every movement with a diminuendo here, a crescendo there. From the musicians' bows once again comes the rustle, then a gust of wind and then just a whisper of morning breeze, until the last note fades away.

The teacher smiles and nods. "Thanks."
The students scatter. They have Advanced Placement tests to study for and prom dresses to buy.

But for the music teacher, the end of this rehearsal marks one more gone on a countdown in her head that began the day she decided that after more than 40 years, it is time to retire.

For Okemos orchestra director Marilyn Kesler, it was one week and counting until her last concert.

Developing a program

“I never expected to stay here this long,” she says, surveying her office in Okemos High School. “But after I got here, I became attached. To the community, the parents, the program.”
The program. That’s how Okemos music folks refer to their world-renowned orchestra and band curriculum.

Under Kesler’s direction, many Okemos students have gone on to professional music careers in symphonies around the globe and onto the faculty of prestigious universities.

The Okemos orchestra has toured the nation and the world with her. It played for Coretta Scott King in the King Center of Atlanta and at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., before former President Gerald Ford.

It played in Mexico, Canada, Prague, Rome and Venezuela — a trip most memorable for the way the students from each country learned to speak to each other using their instruments, she recalls.

Most notably are the trips to Ludwigshafen, Germany. The orchestra has been there six times, and its students come here. That is a tradition Kesler hopes will continue after she’s gone.

And of all the photos on the walls of the orchestra room, it is one from the last Germany trip she loves the most.

“You can’t tell who the Americans are and who the Germans are,” she says.
Kesler is quick to point out she is simply one person in an entire team, an entire community, of music enthusiasts who spent years crafting a network of support and expectations for which no one person can be credited.

In this program, students are likely to pick up their first instruments when they still have a mouth full of baby teeth. Private tutors and prestigious summer camps are the norm.

When they reach middle school — the age when students in most school districts see their first pages of sheet music — many Okemos kids already have clocked hundreds of hours of individual lessons and are tackling classical pieces.

It is not uncommon for alumni who have gone on to professional music careers to come back and work with the students.

And behind every performance is the Okemos Music Patrons, an active cache of 50 or more parents who can rally at a moment’s notice to raise money, collect uniforms or help Kesler in her office.

“I can’t take the credit,” she says. “It has not just been me.”
To that, her colleagues shake their heads.
“She never takes the credit,” said middle school band director Kevin Culling. “But it’s all her. This program wouldn’t be what it is without her.”
Students — current and former — say it boils down to one thing. Dedication.

“We call her Mama K because this orchestra is like a family,” said Lauren Morrison, a senior viola player. “She is the most dedicated teacher I’ve ever had.”

But it also could be something much simpler.
Kesler loves the music.

Appreciating the talent

Outside her office, the familiar melody of a piece from “Phantom of the Opera” suddenly breaks the early-afternoon silence. She waves almost impatiently from the doorway.

“You want to come with me for a second? I want you to hear this.”

She hurries down the hall separating the orchestra room from the band room.

“This is a freshman band,” she says, with emphasis on freshman, as if to say, can you believe the talent in these young kids?

She stands silently in the doorway and listens.

“This,” she says, “I will miss this.”

When she joined the Okemos staff as the middle school band director in the late 1960s, Kesler already was making her mark in the music world. She was part of a team at the University of Wisconsin that was the first to publish an adaptation of the Suzuki method to the cello.

Suzuki is a music education philosophy developed by the late Dr. Shinichi Suzuki, a Japanese musician who believed that much like a spoken language, children can learn to speak the language of music at a very young age — as young as 3 or 4 — if they are immersed in it.

After moving to Okemos, Kesler launched a Suzuki program for young cellists. She can’t say for sure how many students have trained with her, but she has averaged 20 a year over 40 years.

“Do the math,” she says.

Felix Wang was one of them. Now a cello professor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, he is one of the many Okemos success stories.

“The fact that she could take this sleepy little suburb and create what is one of the great public school music programs in the country is pretty remarkable,” he says.

“Whenever I travel to perform and people ask me where I’m from, I know that when I say ‘Okemos, Michigan,’ someone is going to say, ‘Oh, wow, you must have been part of Marilyn Kesler’s program.’”

He’s always proud to say yes. And frankly, he says, people can’t believe she’s actually retiring.

“I get tired now,” she explains with a shrug, adding that she’s 67 and isn’t that reason enough?

But it’s not like she’s leaving the music world completely. She will continue playing cello in the Lansing Symphony Orchestra, and she’ll maintain her Suzuki program.

End of an era

But her retirement still marks the end of an era, which is why people involved in the program plan such an extensive celebration in her honor.

It’s shrouded in secrecy. Kesler doesn’t know all of the details about what they’re planning. She just knows the June 8 concert will feature solo performances from several Okemos alumni who went on to professional music careers.

“She has devoted her entire life and energy to help our kids grow,” said Kiko Tanimoto, an Okemos parent whose three children all went through the orchestra program. “We all benefited. I always tell people that it’s like she planted a little tree in a field, and we became part of a forest.”

The fact that so many former students are willing to come back for her brings tears to Kesler’s eyes. But it’s one former student who can’t come that makes her feel especially proud. He e-mailed her and

apologized that he couldn't play in the retirement concert because he will be in Germany visiting the family with whom he stayed years ago during one of the orchestra's trips there.

"Isn't that amazing?" she says. "After all these years, he developed such a deep a friendship with them." And that, more than anything else, is what she'd like her legacy to be.

"I hope that they will look back at their years in high school fondly and appreciate that they have made some lasting friendships." Her eyes grow red around the edges. "And that they will enjoy music for the rest of their lives."

It's one week later, and the orchestra room is loud and chaotic as students gather before the concert. Every once in a while, they peek over their shoulders to make sure she's not in the room. They have two surprises for her.

They have rehearsed a special piece just for her that they will play without a conductor, and they will announce they have collected more than \$2,500 to establish two scholarships in her name through the Okemos Music Patrons.

One of the scholarships will be set aside for a student who has been accepted to a college or university music program. The other will be for students who will pursue a non-music career but want the chance to attend a summer camp just because they love to play.

Kesler's choice of piece for this, her last concert, is no accident. "The Last Spring" is one of her favorites and is clearly symbolic.

It's either sad or uplifting, depending on the interpretation. She said she hoped to get through it without crying.

The auditorium erupts in applause as she takes the stage. The students straighten in their chairs, instruments poised, eyes partly on the music before them and partly on the woman demanding their attention.

If Kesler cries during the piece, it isn't visible to the audience. Her movements reveal nothing but focus and total immersion in the music.

Until the last note fades away.

Dorothy McDonald: Her passion inspires her students

EAST LANSING — The hallway outside the auditorium at East Lansing High School is an obstacle course of orchestra students and their stuff.

Purses. Instruments. Beat-up backpacks and dirty sneakers.

It's just before noon May 21, and the last orchestra concert of the year is less than seven hours away. There's one more rehearsal.

Some students are shoveling food into their mouths because they are missing lunch for this, which they say is a common occurrence. Morning practices, lunch practices, weekend practices. It takes a strong commitment to be in the East Lansing orchestra.

"You want to talk about Mrs. McDonald?" one of them says when asked about their teacher. "Come sit by me. I'll tell you everything you need to know."

His name is Jake Fox-Long, a junior and a viola player. He describes himself as the worst musician in the entire orchestra. But, he says with a grin, he is Mrs. McDonald's favorite student.

"Three words that describe Mrs. McDonald," Jake says. "Dedicated. Dedicated. Dedicated."

Ten other heads nod in agreement, even as they throw out their own words.

"Focused," says Samrawit Tessema, a Stanford-bound senior.

"Perfectionistic," says 14-year-old Ana Sofia Suarez, who quickly wonders aloud if that is even a real word.

"She's messily organized," says freshman cellist Noah Weiland. They could go on and on. But the most important thing to know about McDonald, they say, is that she doesn't care how good you are.

Just as long as you put your heart and soul into it.
Just as long as you play with passion.

Approaching the last concert

McDonald was having a moment. Wet-eyed, she covered it with a cough and dug a tissue from her pocket. Unexpected emotion is both the joy and the curse of being one of those touchy-feely artsy types, she said. Lately, the emotion has been playing a major game of sneak attack.

"It's just time," she said, looking around her office in East Lansing High School, pondering her retirement. "I've been here for 31 years."

It was three days before the last concert, and up until that point, she had very few opportunities to think about the significance of one simple fact: This was the last concert. This was it.

Maybe she had been subconsciously avoiding such maudlin thoughts, but big events often bring unplanned reflection. Right then, she was thinking about Esther Wyman.

Wyman was her first music teacher. Back when she was a child and all her family could afford was a \$15 violin that they saw advertised in the paper. Back when she was a student at Logan Elementary School just outside of Detroit.

"The sweetest, poorest little school," McDonald said. "We were as poor as church mice."

But Wyman didn't let lack of funds get in the way of musical potential. Wyman let McDonald's mom pay for her daughter's private lessons by sewing the teacher's performance clothes.

"She built a good program in a poor Polish neighborhood," McDonald said. "We were even on the radio."

Anticipating the next obvious question, she nodded. "Yes. I think I am a carbon copy of her."

Her pace is fast like Wyman's, she said. And then there is the passion. "You have to have passion."

Actually, being a teacher was not McDonald's original plan. She wanted to play violin professionally in a major symphony orchestra. But something happened that has changed the plans of many a person.

She fell in love, got married and had a family. She didn't want to leave her three children all the time to tour with an orchestra.

So she went into teaching, spending her first 10 years in different schools in the Detroit area. Then, 31 years ago, she came to East Lansing.

"And everything changed," she said. "It was magical here. I had no idea that communities like this existed. I had no idea there were places that cared this much about music." Which is why she refuses to accept much of the accolades tossed her way right now.

Like her close friend, Okemos Orchestra Director Marilyn Kesler, who also is retiring (yes, they planned it that way), she believes that she is one piece of a bigger team.

"We have an exquisite program here, and the No. 1 reason is our affiliation with the university," she said. "No. 2, it's because of the private teachers and the parents. Without the access to private lessons and the parents, this would not happen."

Changing times at the school

But a lot has changed over the years.

"There are all these new requirements for kids," McDonald said, referring to new state and national testing standards. "There are so many pressures on students. They're taking four years of language, four years of math, but we still only have a six-hour day. We have become the electives."

It used to be a given that a student who started orchestra as a freshman still would be in it as a senior.

"Now," she said, "we're lucky if we can get a student for three years in high school because they just can't fit it into their days. I have kids who come in during lunch just so they can keep playing."

Nowadays, an orchestra director must be as much a recruiter as a teacher. You have to find ways to keep the kids involved, she said. Threaten them with a lower grade? Doesn't work, because they will simply focus their attentions on one of the many other activities in which they are involved, she said.

"I'm always negotiating. Negotiating with the coaches. I'll let her out for that track meet if you'll let her out for our rehearsal. That sort of thing. Kids are just spread so thin now."

So for the students who do stick with it ... why?

"She is the one who made me want to be good at the violin," says Marissa Vermeersch, a 16-year-old sophomore. "She has tried to help me become the best I can be."

Because the way she teaches music gives them life lessons they'll use in other endeavors, says Jake.

"She has inspired us to have music in our lives," says Noah. Samrawit nods. "I will carry that with me forever." Mrs. McDonald is having a moment.

The expectant eyes of 30 or so students rest on her face as she complains of an ill-timed cold. It could be true. Or it could be another one of those moments.

It is now six hours and counting until the concert. The last rehearsal is almost over. Some say music is a conversation. A back and forth from instrument to instrument, orchestra to audience, conductor to musician. It is how Dorothy McDonald communicates.

She picks up the baton again, moment over. Because, seriously, when you're asking a bunch of high school students to master the five movements of "Capriccio Espagnol," there is no time for moments.

Evoking emotions

Like Kesler in Okemos, McDonald's music choice for the last concert is no accident. The piece has it all. Five moments that evoke every emotion possible.

It is fast and boisterous. It is flamboyant and beautiful. But most of all, it is passionate. And these students have it down.

She beckons with her hand as they crescendo. "Come on," she encourages. "Keep going. Don't let it end too fast. That note, that's it. Hold that one forever."

And then it tapers off.

She smiles at them. "Wow, if that isn't the greatest piece you've ever played, I don't know what is. It doesn't get any better than that."

Rehearsal is over. The students rush from the room because they have to get back to their other classes. One girl stops briefly to make sure with McDonald that it's OK that she is late to the concert because she has a track meet.

McDonald hesitates. But then she nods. "Yeah, that's OK."

The last student leaves, and the stage is nearly empty. She takes a long look around and wonders if she'll get emotional during the concert.

"Usually the logistics just take up all my attention," she says. "But after the performance, we'll hand out all the awards and then the seniors ..."

She stops.

There it is again.

Another moment.

"Oh God, I didn't think I'd go through this. I didn't think it would be this tough. But this is the last one." McDonald gathers her composure and her music. And exits stage right.
