

Published March 3rd, 2010

Music Students Learn From Experienced Elders

By Cathy Tyson



Acalanes student Erin Grant with her saxophone and Bob Sutherland, both members of The Big Band of Rossmoor Photo Cathy Tyson

"The relationship goes way beyond music," said Director Maurice Levich of the wonderful mentoring by seniors that play in the The Big Band of Rossmoor and music students. Members range in age from twelve to over 90. At a recent dance event in the Veterans Memorial Building, the Band played flawlessly, while couples of a certain age along with younger folks and a young family filled the dance floor. At 31 members strong, including 15 students, the musicians played classics like "Take the A Train," "Moonlight Serenade," and "Mean to Me" that had the toes of an appreciative audience tapping.

"It's cool to be able to play with musicians who were around during the formative years of jazz - they're pioneers," said Campolindo senior and saxophone player Sammy Barton. He has sat next to Charlie Birt, lead alto sax player, for the last year and a half; "a bond definitely develops - he's quite a character," adds Barton. The school Jazz Band and Symphonic Band member describes the relationship as very supportive and encouraging, and notes that all the musicians are "sharp as a tack." Sammy's mother, Suzanne Barton agrees, "The band has been awesome for Sammy. It's been a huge blessing, exposing him to these caring, giving people."

At 88 years young, Bob Sutherland can still belt it out. He played the trumpet in high school in Alameda, but then quit for a number of years while busy with work and family. Upon his retirement, this talented musician played with the Diablo Symphony, Diablo Light Opera and Walnut Creek Concert Band.

When asked if it bothered his neighbors when he practiced, Sutherland said "The beauty of living in Rossmoor is half of the residents are hard of hearing." He clearly enjoys the Band and all the energy and enthusiasm of the student members.

"These seniors can remember what it was like to first learn to play their instruments and are able to offer suggestions from a lifetime of musical experience," said Levich. "Imagine what it's like to join a band and all of a sudden have twenty-five additional grandparents" especially, "sharing a music stand with a person seventy years older - the experience becomes more than reading notes on a page." Being able to hear and interpret the way it should sound is an invaluable opportunity for these younger musicians.

Erin Grant, an Acalanes junior, plays in the Jazz Band and in the Concert Wind Ensemble at school and still finds time for The Big Band of Rossmoor. She got involved in the 6th grade when a spot became available. She proved herself capable after sitting in with the band for a week and was invited to join. "I learned about the fundamentals of jazz and how to listen to music, and grew so much." Although she was playing saxophone at the recent concert, she also plays the piano, clarinet and flute.

She describes the Rossmoor elders as the nicest group you'd ever meet, "They are just like kids." Even though it's still too early for college applications, she plans on continuing with music and would love to be in the UC Berkeley Marching Band.

According to Levich, every single student in the sax section, including Grant and Barton, has been mentored by Mary Fetting, the first female artist to be invited to play with the Stan Kenton Band at the tender age of twenty. Between the musicians, arranger and Band Co-Director Frank Como, this is quite a talented roster of mentors for these gifted youngsters. By all appearances it looks - and sounds - like a winning combination for the seniors and the youth, not to mention their fans.

The aptly named Generations in Jazz Foundation is dedicated to supporting community music activities. The Foundation has supported the Lafayette Jazz Festival since 2000 and The Big Band of Rossmoor since 1996, as well as the Contra Costa County Honor Jazz Bands since 2003. Their next dance is on May 7th at the Veterans Memorial Building. For more information on The Big Band of Rossmoor, go to www.thebigbandofrossmoor.org.

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