

Lamorinda Music Teacher Recognized for Life of Achievement

By Daniel Smith



Rick Meyer at a recent Acalanes High School band rehearsal

Photo Ohlen Alexander

It's strange to hear longtime music teacher Rick Meyer say he feels embarrassed about receiving the California Music Educators Association (CMEA) Hall of Fame Award. After four decades teaching in Lamorinda, he's more than used to a little recognition.

Meyer, who taught at Miramonte High School from 1973 to 1984 and Acalanes High School from 1984 to 2008, continues to be recognized by parents, colleagues, and students of past and present (he's now a sub at Miramonte). While their appreciation is nice, privacy has its advantages. Meyer had to give up the Round Up years ago to avoid knocking back drinks with former students. And when he does his local shopping, Meyer much prefers Moraga. It's worth noting that Meyer doesn't seem to be exaggerating – several former students and a trombonist colleague made an appearance at Lafayette's Papillon cafe during our interview.

Even if you've never personally seen Meyer, chances are you have heard his music – it's been the soundtrack for Lamorinda civic life. Among his greatest hits is the Orinda Volunteer Marching Band – famous for ad-

mitting anyone with an instrument – cooked up in collaboration with former Orinda mayor Bobbie Landers in year zero of the city's cherished Fourth of July parade. Over the years, Meyer and his ever-changing iterations of high school bands played countless other Lamorinda venues, too. "Halftimes on Friday night, concerts, music festivals, Rossmoor, all kinds of stuff," he said. "Somebody calls and says 'Rotary needs something done, get down there and take care of that.'"

Meyer also took his students on the road, entering them in competitions across the state. Meyer's bands won yearly "unanimous superior" ratings at the CMEA's music festival, proving that public practice makes perfect.

Meyer built the success of his programs through a commitment to improvement, or as he calls it "keeping your chops up." He embodies this commitment, practicing the clarinet – his preferred instrument – an hour and a half daily. Meyer also practiced instruments with which he wasn't so familiar, a reminder of what commitment to improvement means to beginners like his students.

"You forget how hard it is, how hard they have to work to get it," he said. If Meyer assigned music, he practiced that, too. To do otherwise, in Meyer's view, would be "like an English teacher who never read a book after college. You (would) lose track of what the kids are going through."

The real trick to a successful music program, though, said Meyer, is that "your program has to be so good, it'll succeed in spite of you." Meyer's statement is more than a self-deprecating deflection of credit. It's a nod to the fact that an inspired teacher is only part of the recipe; a successful music program also needs community support and quality equipment. Meyer worked tirelessly to secure both. A prime example: 1994 found Acalanes' instruments worn down. Meyer, tired of the old bake sale model of fundraising or "selling light bulbs" as he facetiously calls it, decided to let the kids and the music make the money. He rented out Walnut Creek's Regional Center for the Arts and let the band do its thing. In two years the ticket sales earned them \$80,000 – enough to replace every instrument at Acalanes.

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