

February 23, 2016

Kirisits and the Mount Mercy Music Department Hit All the Right Notes

Consistency is the key factor in many successful professions and relationships. Much of the success of the award winning Mount Mercy Music Department can be accredited to long-time teacher and director Fred Kirisits. For the past 37 years Kirisits has taught, conducted and directed the various music classes and programs at Mount Mercy.

The music bug bit Kirisits at a young age. In the fifth grade he decided to learn to play the accordion, an instrument that he felt was the “coolest thing”. His grandfather bought him an accordion and paid for three years of lessons. His prowess on the accordion soon led him to become a part of a wedding band. By the time Kirisits was 16, he had begun taking piano lessons from a neighbor on his street.

Kirisits’ guidance counselor at Canisius High School convinced him to attend the University of Buffalo for engineering. After a semester of engineering, Kirisits was drawn to a career in music. He spoke with members of the college’s music department but did not receive much encouragement. He began taking classes as a sophomore, although he was not yet accepted into the music program. He was spending three hours a day practicing his piano playing in hopes of successfully completing his audition at the end of that year for the music program. His diligence and determination paid off as he was accepted and eventually graduated from the University of Buffalo with both a Bachelor of Arts Degree and a Masters Degree in Music education. Kirisits continued his musical growth by completing post graduate work in acoustics and choral techniques at the Eastman School of Music. He is also a member of the Hand Bell Musicians of America and attends its conference every three years.

Kirisits’ teaching career began at St. Gregory the Great School. While there, he was a member Top 40 music band. One of the band’s gigs was playing at the Mount Mercy Senior Prom. He had seen the school’s show choir perform and had been impressed with the group’s talent. While at the prom, someone mentioned that the school was looking for a music teacher. Kirisits secured an interview and for the past 37 years he has led the music program at Mount Mercy Academy.

Students at Mount Mercy, a Catholic College Preparatory High School for Young Women, are offered the opportunity to enroll in Freshman Chorus, Women’s Choir, Music Theory, Magic Belles (a hand bell choir) and beginning piano. In addition, students may audition for Pure Magic, a group which sings while performing dance routines.

In 1990, after taking the acoustics course, Kirisits decided to initiate the Hand Bell program. Students receive five hours of training before auditioning for placement within the choir. The Mount Mercy Magic Belles are an award-winning group, who along with Pure Magic, have performed at both Disney World and Disneyland. The pinnacle of Kirisits career was achieved when the Magic Belles, under his direction, were invited to perform with the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. The group was able to take the stage with the Philharmonic at Kleinhan’s Music Hall and Kirisits was able to conduct his group on the Kleinhan’s stage.

Kirisits, the Greater South Buffalo Chamber of Commerce Educator of the Year in 2014 and past Spirit of Mercy award winner, is a great proponent of the benefits of participating in music. He believes that there is a demonstrated correlation between academic success and music. Kirisits feels that music allows the students to be more relaxed and happier since it a different, less-structured atmosphere than the high-stress college preparatory curriculum.

“One of the things I enjoy most about my job is the novelty of what I do. I am able to do something different each year,” Kirisits commented. “I am able to pick new pieces each year. I am not forced to do the same things year in and year out. It is also refreshing to have a new group of students to work with each year.”

Although in 1988 Kirisits stopped playing in the Top 40 Band after 15 years of playing, he still occasionally provides cocktail piano music. His schedule would not allow for much more than this as he takes his Women's Choir, Pure Magic Show Choir and Magic Belles to a yearly competition. He plans and arranges the trip himself as well as coordinating fund-raising for the groups.

During the last five years, the three groups have performed at the Heritage Music Festivals in Atlanta, Dallas, Hollywood and Orlando. At these Festivals groups perform trying to attain as high a score as possible. The groups then receive medals based on their scores. Pure Magic, Magic Belles and the Women's Choir earned a combined total of 13 gold and 2 silver medals in those five competitions.

However this year the group will travel to Disney World to compete in a head to head competition with other musical groups. College professors and other music professionals will judge the groups and determine placements and scores.

These successes have established the Mount Mercy Music program as an elite program in Western New York. The Pure Magic Show Choir and the Magic Belles have brought positive recognition for Mount Mercy throughout Western New York and beyond.

"My favorite part of teaching and directing the various groups is watching the progress of the students I teach. Witnessing their growth in the three or four years that I work with them is so rewarding. Seeing a girl who can't sing as a freshman, sing solos as a senior is something that gives me great pleasure," Kirisits remarked.

With Kirisits leading it, there is no doubt that the Mount Mercy music program will continue to scale new heights and hit all the right notes.



Mount Mercy Academy

A Catholic College Preparatory High School for Young Women

88 Red Jacket Parkway | Buffalo, New York 14220 | www.mtmercy.org | T (716) 825-8796 | F (716) 825-0976