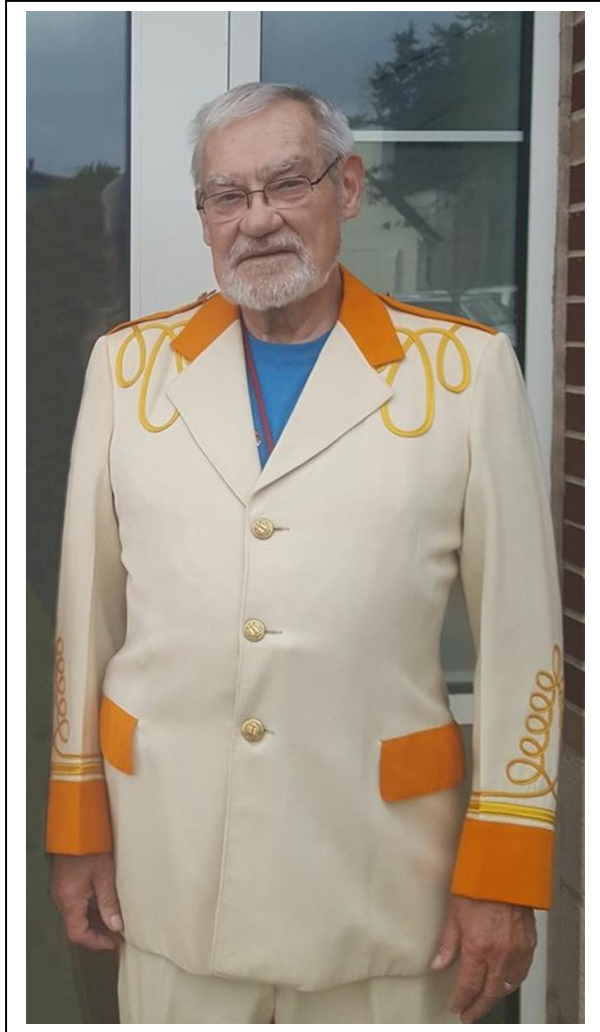


MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Ronald J. Keller, WJU #492



Early in Ron Keller's life, his grandfather advised him, "Follow your passion and it will never be work." And that has certainly been the case with Ron's teaching and musical career.

Born and raised in Naperville, IL, where he and his wife, Vicki, still live, Ron is a 5th Generation native of that community. Population was about 4000 people when he was born there, and it's approaching 150,000 now. Being involved with the Naperville School District 203 for 26 years and conducting the Naperville Municipal Band for 54 years, he and his family are obviously well known in Naperville. Further, Ron's passion for music and music education has given him national reach and recognition.

Ron attended the Naperville Public Schools, K-12, and then achieved a B.S. in Education from Northern Illinois University, majoring in Music. In 1967, he received a Master of Music Education degree from Vandercook College of Music, and in 1999, a Doctor of Philosophy degree from Summit University of Louisiana.

His connection with the Naperville Municipal Band actually started long before Ron was born. His great-grandfather, Joseph Bapst, was the Naperville Band director in the 1870s and 1880s. Ron still has Joseph's Henry Distin cornet that was manufactured in 1882. Further, his grandfather played cornet and was a bugler. Ron's mother and father also played in the Naperville Band for many years with his mom playing marimba, cornet, Treble Clef Baritone and Alto Horn, but primarily marimba. His dad played alto horn and, occasionally, cornet. After his dad spent 50 years playing after beats on the alto horn, Ron asked him how he could stand it. The response? "Kid, if it's not there, it's empty.

So, the music genes were strong! And they are continuing to the next generation with one son playing flute/piccolo and another playing percussion. His daughter, Diana (WJU #3596), plays euphonium and has been to several of our Conventions/Meets.

Naturally, as a toddler, Ron would go to all the concerts of the Naperville Band. In addition, every Monday night, the family listened to the Cities Service Band of America broadcast on radio. Those broadcasts, conducted by Paul Lavallo, were live with no rehearsals, just a 30-minute talk-through before the show. Bill Bell and Harvey Phillips were on tuba in that band. Guests on the show included Karl King, Henry Fillmore, J.J. Richards and others we would all recognize.

Early on he decided he wanted to play "bass horn". When he was nearing the end of second grade, the high school director brought a Sousaphone over to the grade school for him to try out. It was certainly bigger than he was, but he shouldered it and marched around the gym. His initial blast on it likely shook the walls. Thus it happened, and he was playing tuba in the school band as a 3rd grader. The band director gave him private lessons at his house six blocks away and Ron would also play while walking to and from those lessons, no doubt impressing onlookers along the route. At this point, he was playing an Eb Helicon. In 10th grade, he was able to switch to the high school's only BB-flat tuba.

Throughout his schooling, Ron's goal was always to be in the first chair position, and not pursue a career as a professional musician. Indeed, early on he decided he wanted to teach and be a band director. And a music educator he became, spending 4 years at the Milledgeville schools and 2 years at the Dwight Township High School, before being asked to come back to Naperville and the school system there.

His first assignment at Milledgeville was a real challenge. Ron was their 6th band director in seven years. He had just one-and-a-half weeks to get the band together for the County Fair. "Military Escort" (by Henry Fillmore as Harold Bennett) was the tune they were to perform, and the kids couldn't play it. They couldn't read music! With concentrated drilling they somehow got through it. After his first year there, the Junior High Band played better than the High School Band, and one-third of the school's students were now in his band.

Later on in Naperville, Ron was asked to be the band director at a brand new junior high school. He agreed, but said they couldn't afford him ... and he didn't mean salary. He wanted full support in building the music program from scratch. The demand was for all new, top of the line instruments, worthy band uniforms, and a band room designed by Ron. It all happened.

Ron has taught at all levels of instruction: grade school, junior high, high school and college ... and even church choirs. Further, for 18 years he was coordinator of music for the Naperville School District 203 while carrying a full teaching assignment.



Ron with his 1899 BB-flat York Helicon tuba and 1913 Buescher E-Flat Helicon

Certainly, the tuba is his primary instrument, but Ron can also play cornet, horn, trombone and in the clarinet section. He played 4th trombone – a tuba with slides? -- in his high school stage band. While in college he also got a taste of Dixieland. For a talent contest amongst fraternities, his group decided on playing Dixieland. They chose "Basin Street Blues" and "Saints Go Marching In." They had no written music for either of these so just put it together "by ear." They practiced three times with a routine where the drummer entered first, then the tuba, and then the others. They had to audition before five judges to qualify for the contest. The judges concluded they were "too good" to compete, but were asked to play in between the acts. The end result being they had to learn a bunch of new numbers!

The year following getting his Masters degree, he received a call from Paul Yoder, asking him to play tuba at the Midwest Band Clinic that year, with Merle Evans conducting the "All-Star" Band. And it was indeed, "All Star" The band had a "who's who" percussion section, and Ron found himself in the tuba section seated between Bill Bell on his right and Harvey Phillips on the left. As a result of this event, Ron became friends with Harvey, who on one occasion introduced Ron directly to Paul Lavalle.



Ron conducting at Windjammers 2016 Baraboo Meet

Ron took over as conductor of the Naperville Band in November 1965 when the director died of a heart attack. Pall bearer Bill Albrecht (WJU #494) approached Ron and asked him to be the director, fearing the band might otherwise collapse. Back then, the first concert was Memorial Day and then they would do ten summer concerts. The summer concerts were sometimes like "The Ed Sullivan Show" in that special acts were interspersed. Often, those acts got more public press than the band, so as the band's new director, Ron proceeded to faze those out, focusing on the music.

Ron's philosophy was playing your instrument is a year-round thing, and so he expanded the Band's concert schedule to include Fall, Winter, and Spring indoor concerts, some shared with local high school bands. Despite naysayers, that first shared concert had standing-room-only in a hall holding 1100 people. By 1974, the

Band was doing four indoor concerts a year, one with a high school band included. Ron also started a mentoring program for three of the four indoor concerts, with five different students chosen each time.

Ron first met Doug MacLeod (WJU #407) at the C.L. Barnhouse Company booth at the Midwest Band Clinic in 1976. Doug quickly recognized Ron was a fan of marches as "The voice of the band." They hit it off and Doug introduced Ron to our Windjammers organization. Ron joined in 1979, but his first meet wasn't until January 1981 because of his school obligations. For that one, Ron made a special appeal to his boss for time off because Merle Evans was going to be there conducting at that Convention. It was approved as "Continuing Education." Before the meet, member and conductor Bob Hill quit so they only had Merle to conduct. So, at his very first Convention/Meet, Ron was recruited to conduct, and he has been doing so ever since. Back then, Ron recalls that there were up to a dozen people taping the recording sessions with reel-to-reel recorders.

Ron's first opportunity to play with an actual circus was around 1988 when the tuba player for the Carson Barnes

Circus was hospitalized. Charlie Stevens, bandleader, got Ron's phone number from Merle Evans and persuaded Ron to take this on with only a few hours notice. He played four shows that weekend, and was so focused on the music he had no idea what the acts were. Elephants? What elephants?

Over the years, Ron invited Merle Evans to conduct the Naperville Municipal Band. The first of those happened in 1976 when Ron boldly requested Merle conduct a circus concert in Naperville for the Bicentennial Celebration. Merle instantly remembered Ron from the 1968 "All Star" gig and agreed to the concert. Merle stayed at Ron's house a number of times, and thoroughly bonded with Ron's dog, Sandy.

The Naperville Municipal Band has been well represented at our Windjammers events over the years, with as many as nine of their members participating at a Meet. Ron has hosted three of our Meets in Naperville (1984, 1991, 2009) and was our President 2007-2011. We salute Ron for all of his support and all he has accomplished.



The Keller Family circa 1957: Julie, Adam, Ron, Dorothy ... and Cookie (the smart dog)