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SOMEONE YOU SHOULD KNOW

Trombonist spends 61 years in orchestra

by ELIZABETH TAUFA

As he puts it, Neil Stillman was a “free swingin’ kid.” The Williamsville resident grew up in East Aurora and showed an early interest in movies and movie projection, which led him to a career in photo engraving and drafting, as well as a teaching career at the middle school, high school and college levels.

However, while growing up, he also found a love of music.

“I wanted to play the trumpet because we had an old bugle,” Stillman said. “My father was a salesman and found an old, beat-up trombone for \$5 and brought it home.”

Stillman and his father spent an afternoon cleaning the instrument, and, at his father’s insistence, Stillman started to practice.

He eventually became proficient enough to form a dance band with some of his high school friends.

“We called ourselves The Trojans, and we used to play at the Creekside in East Aurora,” he said. “They used to have canoes on the creek, and if you were a charmer, you took your girl out there.”

Stillman’s love of music continued, and after World War II, he joined a new group called the Amherst Symphony Orchestra.

“(Founder) Joe Wincenc and I were getting out of the service at the same time,” Stillman said. “He was a violinist and wanted to create a group that residents could play in.”

After 61 years, seven children, six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren, Stillman still plays bass trombone in the orchestra.

“I’ve been the librarian and done promotional work (for the orchestra), and I was even stage manager for a couple of years,” he said.

He noted that the changes in the orchestra from its inception to the present — with current director Steve Thomas — have been interesting to watch.

“What the concerts used to be was an overture of some sort, a soloist and then a full-blown symphony,” Stillman said of the Wincenc performances. “After Joe left, Steve came in and modernized the programs, trying to get more people to come and see us.”

Stillman noted that many people in the community love music but don’t all love the same kind of music.

“People want music that they can understand, and that’s usually melodic music,” he said. “There’s also an unwritten law now that we’re going to play something popular. You have to be careful about putting serious music into the program. You have to gear the pieces you play toward audience appeal.”

At 7 p.m. Sunday, April 22, at Amherst Middle School, the Amherst Symphony Orchestra will present its spring concert, featuring Don Harry, principal tuba of the Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra.

“We always do a preconcert program while people are coming in to sit down,” Stillman said.

But this program is close to Stillman’s heart. It’s called “Tons of Tubas” and will feature tuba players of various ages from the area, including Stillman’s 15-year-old grandson, Colin, who is a junior in high school.

“I have seven exceptional kids, but none of them ever got serious about music,” he said. “Music is close to my first love, so it’s great to see this second-generation outcropping of kids enjoying music.”

Another of Stillman’s grandsons, 12-year-old Andrew, plays the alto saxophone.

While Stillman’s passion for music was always a big part of his life, he has also been a businessman, owning his own photo engraving and drafting company until approximately eight years ago.

Stillman has also had a teaching career for more than 40 years. He began teaching print shop techniques at Amherst Central High School, eventually moving to the middle school level and then accepting a graphic communications teaching position at Buffalo State College, a position he held for more than 20 years.

Currently, Stillman is completely retired and enjoys spending time in his garden and with his wife, Nora, to whom Stillman credits the happiness of himself and his family — in addition to playing with the orchestra and a weekly group of trombonists.

If you have a suggestion for someone to feature in this column, send it to Jessica L. Finch, Amherst Bee, associate editor, P.O. Box 150, Buffalo, NY 14231-0150, or call 204-4917.



Neil and Colin Stillman