

Twenty-Five Years of Making Music at Centralia College Comes to End for Instructor

Retiring: Donna Huffman Leaving College After Decades as Music Professor

Posted: Friday, June 12, 2015 11:47 pm

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Donna Huffman comes from a long line of musicians. Her mother and her father's uncle were both first violinists in a symphony, and her father performed in a family orchestra with seven siblings.

"I think I was destined to pick music because it fascinated me and it was easy for me," Huffman, 61, of Olympia, said. The music professor at Centralia College spent her last day working on campus at the graduation ceremony on Friday, bringing her 25-year career at the college to an end.

When she started in 1990, Huffman was hired to teach music theory, but quickly began to expand the music department.

In the first quarter of her first year, she began Centralia College's jazz band, dedicating much of her time to the improvement of her students.

"I kind of started over and said jazz band was going to be a serious contender in the ensemble, and it has been," she said. "It's been a good one for the instrumentalists."

Throughout her years, Huffman not only taught music theory and the jazz band, but was also the choir conductor, an adviser for her students and previously taught music history and music technology.

Originally from Ohio, the professor said she was fortunate enough to grow up in a rural area that valued music. Her high school had approximately 400 students, half of which were interested in participating in band.

The strong musical tradition in her family, and her upbringing, helped Huffman realize that music was her passion, and she began adamantly pursuing it.

Balancing work with school, Huffman attended Brigham Young University for her undergraduate degree and later received her master's degree and doctorate from the University of Illinois.

Much of her college education was paid for by scholarships because of her playing abilities. Shortly after finishing her doctorate, Huffman applied for a job at six schools, all of which offered her a position within a week, she said.

Centralia College was the only two-year school in the mix, and she said she had no explanation for choosing the college.

When Huffman came to tour the campus, her experience was far from perfect. The airlines had misplaced her luggage and the person responsible for giving her the tour managed to lock the two of them in a courtyard in the dead heat of the summer.

As she traveled back to Portland International Airport, she remembered looking around at the burned, brown grass and being less than impressed.

"I said this is one of the ugliest places I've ever seen. There was green on the trees, but everything else was brown," she said. "And then I said, 'But I'm going to work here,' and I don't even know why. I just knew it." That unexplained decision led Huffman into a rewarding career where she would help students hone their musical abilities for two and a half decades.

Her favorite part of the job has been watching her students accept their diplomas, whether they continue with music or not.

"I don't think I've liked one student better than another, but if you consider them all like your children, I just want to see my students improve as people," Huffman said. "I want them to feel they are competent and I want them to have the joy of music I had."

Huffman said she didn't have a "bucket list" for retirement. While most people dream of traveling, volunteering or sleeping in, she plans to be a music observer in a more relaxed capacity. Her hope is to maybe get involved in music therapy, a rising field she said has a lot of potential.

"I think we don't understand how the brain really works with music," she said. "And I think music, as much as we enjoy it, might be the vehicle for truly how we think."