

Thank you for the music



By Bill Kilpatrick

The 2024 North Hastings High School Christmas concert, called 'Twas a month before Christmas, was held at the Bancroft Village Playhouse on Nov. 25. The concert, which can be nerve racking at the best of times for both the performers and the organizers, was more emotional than usual this year as it marked the last time that it would be organized by North Hastings High School educators Dianne Winnill and Troy Thrower who will be retiring at the end of the school year. Winnill and Thrower sat down with Bancroft This Week to reflect on their decades of teaching, lessons they have learned and taught over the years, the highs and lows of being an educator, and the power of music to build confidence, encourage creativity, and change lives. How did you both end up teaching in North Hastings? When asked how long she has been teaching for, Winnill said that she was hired the second week of September in 1995, and Thrower was impressed that she specifically remembered it to the week, but as Winnill explained it was a very specific set of circumstances that led to her getting hired during that second week. Winnill had applied for multiple teaching jobs that summer, but as of Labour Day 1995, she was still without employment. So, she picked up a copy of the Globe and Mail, which was how you looked for jobs at the time since the internet as we know it was still decades away, and she noticed a job opportunity in Bancroft for a music teacher. She applied and was the successful candidate out of the 14 other applicants. It was only later that Winnill found out how lucky she was since that year, according to Winnill, the music program was almost cut from the curriculum. Winnill said that after the retirement of the previous music teacher in 1993, the school had gone through multiple teachers, and was thinking about removing the music program altogether since there was only two sections of music, but thanks to group of citizens it was kept going. After word got out that the music program was going to be cut explained Winnill, 'A bunch of citizens walked into the high school and told the principal at the time that he had to keep the music program, and so he did. They posted the job, and I got it.' Thrower's road to teaching music at the Senior Elementary school was full of a few more twists and turns than Winnill's. In this case, quite literally as while he and his wife Tracy were driving to Bancroft from Mississauga for his interview he took a wrong turn at Buckhorn, 'I had no idea where Bancroft even was,' said Thrower. Regardless he still made it in time, and after changing his clothes out behind the arena he had his interview. And as fate had it Winnill was one of his interviewees and this has stuck with Thrower ever since, but not for reasons you might think. 'I do the whole tour of the school and my interview starts and it's Dianne,'

said Thrower, "and she made me sing in it, I sang in my interview and I was not happy about it at all," exclaimed Thrower, to the laughter of Winmill in the background. Then the real test began as Thrower had to take a computer proficiency test. "The last question in the interview was 'What would you describe as your weakness?' And I said I don't know a thing about computers, nothing. I was still handwriting my essays in university," said Thrower. The interviewer looked a little panicked. Thrower explained, but Thrower was not quite being honest as he had some basic computer skills that saved him in the end. Thrower finished the interview and expected to leave and eventually hear back by phone, but as he and his wife were standing in the staff room, he was surprised by one of the people doing the hiring who said to him in no uncertain terms, "Okay, we need to know right now, do you want the job." Needless to say, Thrower and his wife were taken aback by the question and looked at each other and asked, "Are we moving to Bancroft?" Given that only three people out of Thrower's class of 60 music students got jobs that year, explained Thrower, he felt he had no choice but to accept, which he did and by the end of October that year Tracy also got a job at the same school. How have things changed in the teaching profession over the years? Despite getting hired two years after Ontario Premier Mike Harris took power and began slashing education funding, Thrower still remembers those times as being "better for the kids" than now. "When I got hired there was more support financially from the ministry [of Education]," said Thrower. He gave examples of the extra funding that used to be available when a full-time music teacher was hired that allowed release time for teachers for musicals and other student-centered music projects. "That would never happen now," Thrower lamented. Thrower, who also has a passion for sports and coaching, recalled how sports used to be free for students and how there used to be funding for a late bus that allowed kids who otherwise would not have access to transportation to take part in extracurricular activities. He also spoke about how there used to be funding that took into account the remoteness of North Hastings and subsidized most of those extra transportation costs that students in the Belleville area did not have to shoulder. "It used to be that if you made the team you got to go. Now you have to pay to go to track and field? we don't have the equity that we used to. It's really sad. I've been fighting this for the last couple years." By 2002, five years into the "common sense revolution," things weren't making much sense to Thrower and he almost threw in the towel on teaching. He had gone from teaching music 200 minutes per day to a mere 40 minutes per day. "By my fifth-year I was more of a classroom teacher than a music teacher," explained Thrower, "I wasn't really happy and I nearly left over that." When asked why he chose to stay, Thrower replied, "The community," adding "We had our first child in 2000 and our second in 2002." Then he asked rhetorically, "Where do you want to raise your kids? Do you want to go back to the city? No. The community was so supportive [of] putting family first." For Winmill, who spent her first seven years of teaching "giving everything to the job," she found that it began to take a toll on her health. At the time she did not begrudge the extra work because, as she said she, was always doing something that she wanted like "running a jazz band or a choir," but over time the stress began to take a toll and she had to create more strict boundaries for herself. One of the things that added both loads of enjoyment, but also more stress, was running musicals, which began almost the moment she got the job. "There was always controversy," she explained, "the problem was we were always offending someone. Whether with content in the show or because someone's child did not get a particular part. It was always really awesome and fun, but it was always stressful." In 2006 Winmill came back early from her maternity leave to help produce *Les Miserable*, but it too caused controversy and Winmill decided that was enough. Part of the controversy was a result in the changing political climate noted Winmill, mainly the push for political correctness. "We did *Grease* first. You couldn't do the same script [today], with all the misogyny," she exclaimed. She also noted that another play they put on called *The Wiz*, written by William F. Brown in 1974 based on Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* that was originally meant to have an all-black cast, would never be able to be performed again. "It's huge cultural appropriation," she stated, "I was young and didn't know any better. I know that's no excuse, but I would never do it now." Like Thrower, Winmill also lamented the cuts to education. Winmill, along with another educator Linda Neary, started up the first of its kind two-credit musical theater course in Hastings Prince Edward District School Board, which managed to run for a few years before it too landed on the cutting block. Despite the added stress, both Winmill and Thrower were in agreement that the benefits to the students were enormous, "That's what students remember," said Winmill, "There's so much of that culture that's still here. Students who have kids and their kids are taking music [because of that impact]." Stay tuned for next week's concluding article where Thrower and Winmill talk about the rewards and challenges of teaching, as well as their future plans.