

Faculty member brings passion for music to Southeast

By Kayla Gaffney

Music is something that most people experience in their day-to-day lives — whether it's jamming out to the radio in the car, starting the day with an a cappella number in the shower or blaring a classic rock hit through a pair of headphones during a workout session. But for Steve Schaffner, director of the Music Academy at Southeast Missouri State University, it is much more than just a small part of his day — it's a major part of his life.

Music has played an important role in Schaffner's life ever since he was a young boy watching the "King of Rock and Roll" on the big screen.

"I got started in music because I saw an Elvis Presley movie when I was 5, I saw how Elvis was able to get chicks with music and it's worked for me," Schaffner said.

Schaffner is an alumnus of Southeast, where he obtained a master's degree in music education. But, the road Schaffner took in his educational and professional career was not a common one.

When Schaffner finished high school he originally came to Southeast, but said he was more interested in traveling and playing music than being a student.

"Initially I came up here and I majored in beer and cigarettes," Schaffner said. "I was not mature enough to go to college yet; all I really wanted to do was travel and play on the road, I was not ready to settle down and be a real student."

After playing on the road in country bands for a few years, Schaffner decided to go back to school at Augusta State University in Augusta, Georgia. where he obtained a bachelor's degree in music education. Schaffner said the experiences he had playing on the road served him well.

"Playing on the road and traveling taught me more about people and was more valuable to me in my teaching career than a lot of the methods classes that I took," Schaffner said.

After moving back to Cape Girardeau, Schaffner began teaching in the Cape Girardeau Public School District and continued that for 22 years before retiring.

“Anybody in music, whether you pursue it full time or not, at some point you become a teacher because if you’re successful at all in music somebody else wants to know how you do what you do and you pass it along,” Schaffner said. “Once I got into teaching I really liked it, I especially liked the kids, I especially like junior high-aged kids because they’re so goofy and silly — at least once a day somebody asks me if I miss teaching public school and I say yes, I miss the kids tremendously.”

Being a music teacher, Schaffner also shared his love and knowledge of music with his family. Charlotte Cervantes, Schaffner’s daughter and instructor of dietetics at Southeast, said music always had a presence in their household.

“Music was definitely a really big part of our lives as kids, if not the biggest part,” Cervantes said. “My sister and I were both musicians and continue to be musicians ... a lot of our experiences and journeys as musicians really stemmed from him, he made a lot of that possible for us.”

When Schaffner retired, he was not ready to give up working all together and took a job at Southeast as a groundskeeper.

“I loved it—I liked hanging out with the guys that worked in facilities because all of them are really smart about mechanics...that was a whole skill set that I hadn’t been exposed to,” he said.

And it was then while working as a groundskeeper that the director position opened up.

“At that point I was ready to get back into music and be around kids and do some teaching again,” Schaffner said.

Cervantes said the director position was a good fit for him and came at the right time.

“When the director position came open at the Music Academy that was the logical fit for him, it was a good move for him and it reintroduced him into the world of music,” Cervantes said.

Dr. Gabrielle Baffoni, assistant professor of single reeds at Southeast, said Schaffner’s positive attitude adds to why he was the right man for the job.

“Running a program like that, which is lots of scheduling, lots of different moving parts, it takes someone with a lot of patience to run a program like that,” Baffoni said. “I think he does a great job with all that and he never seems flustered or stressed out, he’s just very positive, smiling—ready to do what needs to be done.”

In addition to being active with music, Schaffner also likes to keep physically active by riding his bicycle to and from work every day.

“I used to be great big and heavy and hypertensive,” Schaffner said. “About 15 or 16 years ago my wife bought me a bicycle for my birthday and a few years after that my daughters and I went to Europe on a music trip and I saw how people walked and biked everywhere and I thought, when I get home I’m going to start riding to work.”

Schaffner has had a full career of playing on the road, teaching in public school and now serving as the director for the Music Academy for the past two years. But, Cervantes said she doubts her father will be slowing down anytime soon.

“I absolutely can’t wrap my head around him slowing down, I don’t think that is even a physiological capability for him,” Cervantes said.