

2018 LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD: Music instrumental in longtime teacher's life

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Karen Huey fell in love with the violin as a fourth grader, and spent the better part of her life as a music teacher and member of an orchestra.

It's this dedication to music that earned Huey The Herald's 2018 Lifetime Achievement Award.

Huey, of Sanford, taught in Lee County for 37 years before retiring in 2013. She spent the majority of her tenure at Lee County High School, where she began in 1976 fresh out of Appalachian State University.

The longtime educator said the passion and excitement of her students kept her coming back. She wanted kids to learn music because the arts gave them a different kind of skill.

"It just gives them another way to channel their output and it's always something that they can keep forever," she said.

During the Lifetime Achievement Award nomination process, email after email poured in from Huey's former students and colleagues. The common theme in all: Huey's willingness to help.

"She was endlessly patient with us. I guess it took us about a year to become totally devoted to her," said Jennifer Luxton Das, a member of Huey's first class in 1976. "After that, she was our everything. She was so good to us."

Das, of Madison, Wisconsin, said Huey helped Das find her first violin. When Das outgrew the instrument, Huey was there again to save the day.

"(She) found a violin in a pawn shop and it was a good violin but it was in really poor shape. It needed a lot of TLC," Das said. "She had it repaired because she knows everybody ... That's still the violin I use today."

Huey's help wasn't limited to students. The Massachusetts native served as Lee County Schools' Fine Arts Chair for more than 20 years. In the position, Huey said, she strived to make teachers' lives easier.

"I tried to get resources for them, tried to do a lot of paperwork they shouldn't have to do so they could concentrate on their teaching," she said. "I'm sort of a helper-type person. I'm leading from the back, helping how I can."

Tamara Lewis landed a job in Sanford as an elementary school music teacher in 1986. New to both teaching and Sanford, Lewis said she benefited from the knowledgeable and selfless fine arts chair.

"I was looking for guidance and Karen, just from the get-go, made contact and made sure I had an orientation to the school system," Lewis said. "She was at the high school and I was at an elementary school. She was just the grande dame of all things arts." Huey's service wasn't confined by school walls, Lewis said. When Lewis and her husband moved from an apartment to a house, Huey jumped in to help the young couple.

"Who was there hauling boxes and bringing friends? It was Karen," she said.

The beloved teacher's musical contributions reach further than just Lee County. For 47 years, Huey said, she's contributed to Appalachian State's Cannon Music Camp, which has been around for 50 years.

She brought orchestral music to Lee County, playing a part in founding the Lee County Community Orchestra. After 30-plus years, Huey continues to play in the storied orchestra and serve on its board.

Huey said the orchestra should be a source of pride for the community.

"If you look at larger cities -- Fayetteville, Charlotte, Chapel Hill, Durham -- they're thought of as being progressive because they have fingers in all sorts of things," she said. "Who would ever think that we are on the par with them of having a community orchestra that has its years in history, has a budget, has a hired conductor?"

In almost 40 years of teaching, Huey made lasting memories and connections with both students and fellow teachers. Huey said, despite retirement, she still keeps in contact with students and gives back to the schools.

This includes a recent trip to B.T. Bullock Elementary School where she talked about careers in music. At the end of her talk, students asked her several prepared questions. One student asked the educator if she was famous, and Huey's response reflected the impact she's made over the years.

"I said, 'Only when I go to Walmart or the grocery store because everybody's saying, 'Hey, Ms. Huey.' "

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