

Kelly Barr Clingan

Great Expectations at Washington Middle School



Photo by Daniel Sheehan

By MOLLY M. CONANT

In Room 8 of Washington Middle School, the Senior Concert Band rehearses under the leadership of Kelly Barr Clingan. As she calls out directions and points out crescendos and accents, the musicians are focused on their instruments, and the notes on the page. When the bell rings, these same musicians transform back into what they are: middle school students, horsing around, yelling, and in the case of the percussionists, rocking out on the drums. As the kids dash to their next classes, Kelly takes a break to talk about her first year as Band Director at Washington.

Although this is Kelly's first year teaching at WMS, it is not her first experience with its music program. Sixteen years ago she was one of the musicians facing the podium, then occupied by Bob Knatt, a beloved and respected music teacher who retired last June after a 36-year teaching career. Kelly stepped into his extremely big shoes in August, and has faced the dual challenges of helping

the students and parents deal with the transition while establishing herself in her new role.

Kelly believes that her years as Knatt's student helped prepare her for her new position, because she was familiar with the program, and knew what she was getting into. As Laurie de Koch, director of the parent booster group Friends of Washington Music (FOWM) explains, "She knows what the heart and soul of music is at WMS, and she has stayed true to it." Indeed, in addition to the daunting task of figuratively picking up Knatt's baton, Kelly feels that one of her greatest challenges is "finding a way to make sure that Washington Music remains Washington Music, as far as the expectations and that high level of excellence."

After leaving Washington, Kelly attended Roosevelt High School, an unusual path, as WMS is generally considered a feeder school for Garfield. At Roosevelt, she became part of the prestigious music program under the direction of Scott Brown. Kelly identifies Brown as her greatest influence, because it was during the last years of high school that she decided to become a music teacher, and under Brown, Kelly had the opportunity to take on various leadership roles. Brown describes her as "an outstanding musician, one of the best Lead Trombone players I have ever had." So great was his respect for her, that during her last two years as a Music Education student at the University of Washington, Brown hired Kelly to return to Roosevelt to teach the after-school jazz band. Kelly also did 10 weeks of her required student teaching with Knatt in the Winter of 2004, while teaching at Roosevelt. After graduating from UW, Kelly spent three years in California, teaching K-8

General Music, "singing songs about turtles and stuff—that was interesting."

Bob Knatt's job was posted one week after Kelly returned from 6 months in Holland, where her husband was working on his dissertation. "It was this amazing timing. I shouldn't have been here when the job posted." Nevertheless, it took four phone calls from Brown to convince her to apply for the position. According to Brown, "[Kelly] had become a demanding, yet compassionate educator...I just knew she'd be a great fit at Washington. There aren't many teachers who could have stepped into those big shoes!" Kelly, however, was still reluctant. "To try to replace somebody who is the best at what they do, somebody who you love, that was too emotional, and it was crazy, crazy talk to be the person who would do that."

With much encouragement from Brown and her family, Kelly applied for the position, and went into the interview with "real clarity in my head. I wanted them to know what they would get, because I wanted the right person to be at this job...whether or not it was me." As part of the interview process, Kelly was asked to teach Jazz Band and Beginning Band in front of a 7-person hiring panel. "Mr. Knatt used to say that it was so crazy that he got paid to do this, because he would do it for free, [and] I felt like that that day. It was so ridiculously fun." Although Knatt was not among the observers, Kelly had the opportunity to speak with him later that day. "I came into his office, and... he tipped his glasses down and looked over them at [me] and said 'Well?' I said 'That was really fun,' and he said 'You're taking the damn job!'"

Kelly recalls that one of Knatt's greatest lessons to her was "Don't patronize kids." On the contrary, she has immense

respect for her students. "Middle school students [are] not just kids," says Kelly. "These are people that have talents and are capable. Both Mr. Knatt and I expect that they will perform at their capacity and not make excuses for themselves." She acknowledges that the methods by which they make these expectations clear is different, and has made no pretense of imitating her predecessor. "I could do a really great Mr. Knatt impression for a couple of weeks, but it's just not my character." While Knatt demanded immediate performance, "I like to give them a day, maybe two. I'm really interested to see if I give them a part and we don't play through it, what's it going to sound like tomorrow? If there's nothing from me, what can they do on their own?" She does admit, however, that if this technique doesn't produce the quality performance she expects, she "goes Knatt on them." "The second it starts to go south, we stop, and we address it. We don't play past mistakes."

Ironically, Kelly never intended to teach Middle School. "When I student taught with Mr. Knatt I felt that middle school was not the appropriate age group for me. I told my mom it takes a really special person to teach this age group, and it's not me." Instead, she wanted to teach high school, because as a perfectionist, she was much more interested in doing the "polishing" work. "I didn't really want to do 'This is how you finger a B flat.' I wanted to do 'Trumpets, let's make sure that release is right on 3.'" She is, therefore, grateful for Knatt's legacy of excellence. "To be able to inherit those kids and that high bar, and to come in and have all that hard work pre-done is pretty amazing."

Despite the fact that it wasn't her original intention, it is apparent that middle school is a good fit for Kelly. According to de Koch, "She's not afraid to hold them accountable when they need direction, but she also knows how to have a good time with them."

Success as a teacher, Kelly believes, is contingent upon earning her students' respect, and she feels she has done this, not only by truly knowing what she is doing, but also by knowing what her weaknesses are and being willing to ask for help. "The second you step in front of a group of 82 middle school kids with noise makers and don't know what the hell you're talking about, you're dead meat. It literally takes 10 seconds, and then the piranhas start."

Those who have witnessed her teaching are quick to praise Kelly. "Kelly always brings focus, passion, intensity and very high expectations

to whatever she does," says Brown. "Although I know it hasn't always been easy for her this year; in the end, I knew she'd earn their approval." As with any new teacher, Kelly and her students have spent this year getting to know each other, and this has been somewhat more challenging with some of the older students, who spent more time under Knatt and were used to his style. Acknowledging the difficulties of this transition from the Knatt era, De Koch says simply "Change is hard, and kids and parents are mourning Mr. Knatt's absence. Kelly is the best answer to that change."