

What Still Rings True

Taylor Gaskins

Teaching through the 2020-21 school year was the emotional equivalent of trying to sprint through quicksand. Change and inconsistency abounded, leaving us little solid ground to stand on while our communities faced loss, setbacks, and hardships. Starting a new academic year while entering month eighteen of unpredictability and shifting protocols ranges from disheartening to disorienting. With everything in flux and no way of knowing which way is up, what can we still rely on to ground us? Despite the challenges we continue to face and where our programs are, there are still truths that ring true through it all.

There is no denying the insidious cavalcade of anxiety, depression, and uncertainty that we faced head-on last year. Months of improvisation and quick pivots left us drained and stretched almost to the breaking point; hearing more of the same from our colleagues at other campuses brought no sense of relief. Community in the traditional sense evaporated overnight. When our worlds and the processes that we trusted in for so long screeched to an ugly halt, we rediscovered just how reliant what we do is on the people we do it with. How lucky are we to find ourselves in a place where we can not only address but start to rectify the loneliness and isolation that we and our students face? Our band halls are still second homes and safer places—nothing will change that. Now more than ever, our students want and need somewhere

to belong. The community we craved for a year and a half is present within our walls, ready and willing to be fostered into lifelong friendships and connections. I see the first embers of excitement in the way my double reed class celebrated together when they made their first sounds. I see the sparks of an expanding family in watching our varsity clarinet section bond over inside jokes passed from year to year, in watching our best oboist mentoring his stand partner, in catching our bassoon students swapping advice on impossible fingerings when they think no one's looking. We are at our best when we take care of each other. Our students will inherit the best of what we demonstrate in front of them. When the world continues to turn upside down, we have the privilege of showing our students that a community built on grace, kindness, and perseverance will outlast any obstacle thrown its way. It is a hard decision to make and a harder ideal to choose to pursue on a daily basis, but the connections it strengthens are worth every ounce of effort.

We are at our best when we take care of each other. Our students will inherit the best of what we demonstrate in front of them. When the world continues to turn upside down, we have the privilege of showing our students that a community built on grace, kindness, and perseverance will outlast any obstacle thrown its way.

It can be so easy to be swept up into the fatal act of comparison, especially against the goals and dreams that we all harbored before our circumstances shifted. The fact of the matter is this: no one had a normal year. All of us are still reckoning with the way that the last eighteen months shook everything we knew. The beauty in all of this is that band kids are still band kids. They will still show up ready and willing to work for something that they love and care deeply about. If our focus remains on all the things our students should have been able to do by now, we risk losing them. The people in front of us are far more important, holistically, than anything they don't know or can't do yet. Musical skills can always be taught later than anticipated, marching skills can always be recovered, your clarinets will always groan when you ask them to play their three-octave G scale. The timeframe is irrelevant; our students will always be able to rise to the expectations we set for them if our motivation is out of love and care. No matter how far we are from where we believe we should be, the core

What Still Rings True

purpose of music education remains unchanged: relentless determination to provide positive musical experiences for all. Though our circumstances may change the kinds of experiences we can provide, we are still capable of providing the positive. The students in our band halls are present and keep coming back because they see the value of the experience beyond the ebbs and flows of the good days and the rough. Against all odds and against all inconsistency, through too many quarantines, our students are still here. The least we can do for them is meet them where they are and relentlessly encourage them while they're with us on their musical journey.

Almost twelve years to the day, I still remember the second I knew I wanted to be a band director. A terribly awkward brace-faced seventh-grade clarinet player looked up during a pep rally performance in 2009 and saw nothing but joy on her band director's face. In hindsight, it was a perfectly ordinary moment. While the specifics of our performance of *Oye Como Va* are long gone, that split second glance changed everything. Through music, I found a family that I never knew I needed and fit in somewhere for the first time in my life. Somewhere in your program

is a student who desperately needs band. The last eighteen months may have them coming to us more uncertain than anything else. No matter if they're new to our rosters or coming back for year three or four, they are still searching for a place where they matter unconditionally and for

something they can dare to claim as their own. Deep down in all of us is a remnant of that same student. We can empathize with where they're coming from because we've been in their shoes. Something in band changed us on such a fundamental level that we promised to do the same for future generations—whether the motivation factor be the family we found, the journeys we witnessed, or the music that we fell in love with along the way. The joy radiated when we teach

what we love travels farther than we will ever know and will have a greater influence than any of us will ever realize. At the end of it all, music still changes lives. It changed mine, it changed yours, it will shift our students' hearts towards each other and forward, into who they need to be.

May we find everything we need in the ways that we pour into our students and find hope in the way that they pour into each other. The kids are alright, and we will be too.

If our focus remains on all the things our students should have been able to do by now, we risk losing them. No matter how far we are from where we believe we should be, the core purpose of music education remains unchanged: relentless determination to provide positive musical experiences for all.

Taylor Gaskins is the Assistant Band Director at Wayside Middle School in Saginaw, Texas, and serves as the College Team Lead for Young Band Directors of Texas. She is a proud alumna of the University of North Texas and the 2018 Malcolm Helm Memorial Scholarship recipient. Outside of the band hall, Taylor can normally be found volunteering with her church's music ministry, video-calling her family, or recreating her grandmother's pie recipes.