

PROFILE

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Kingston





Chris Alfano

BY SETH DUCHENE WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY WAYNE HIEBERT

ASKING CHRIS ALFANO WHAT HIS GOALS ARE FOR THE FUTURE TRIGGERS A pause and a slight shrug of the shoulders. He suggests that it's probably a good idea not to have too many goals and just to let life unfold as it may — who knows what's around the corner? It's a logical answer for Chris. After all, he couldn't have predicted how his own life has developed to this point.

Over the past 12 years, Chris has become a much-beloved music teacher and band director at LaSalle Secondary School, where he oversees an adult band that comprises primarily seniors who are learning instrumental music. What he's witnessed emerge in that classroom, however, is something he could never have anticipated, and it now has him investigating in-depth the benefits of intergenerational interaction.

Music has been the catalyst for this and for many events in Chris's life. "I've been interested in music for as long as I can remember," he says, describing the support his parents provided him and his older brothers, Nick and Dave, in Hamilton; it was a household where musical talent was given a chance to flourish.

"My father was a great lover of jazz music, and he and my mother encouraged me and my brothers to take up music," he explains. "They really wanted us to have the opportunity they never had for music experience and training. So all three of us were given instruments of our choice."

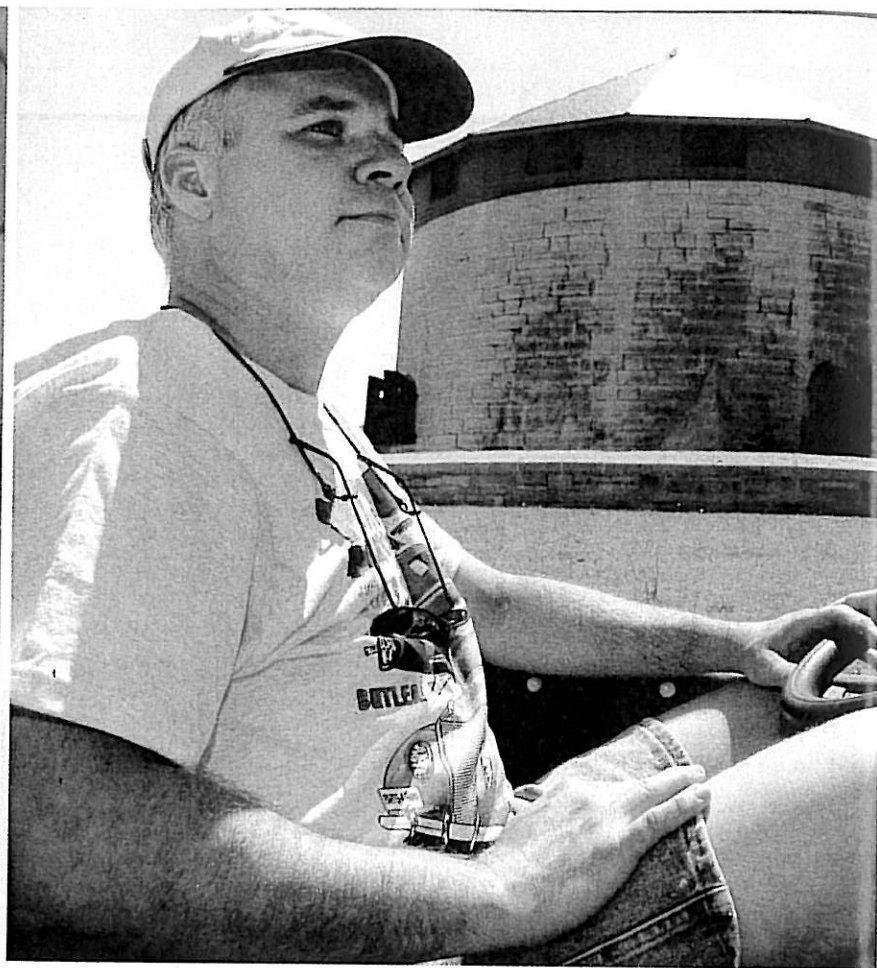
Chris chose to play the clarinet at age eight, picking up the instrument after Dave decided clarinet wasn't his interest. "When Dave quit the clarinet and took up the tenor sax, the clarinet was in the house, so I jumped at that," he says. "Dad had lots of records of the big bands — Woody Herman and Benny Goodman — and I really, really liked the sound of that instrument."

His love affair with music took hold. "Pretty quickly, it became something that I found very important in my life — listening to music, practising and playing music. My parents never had to force me to practise. Of course, there were times, as a young guy, when I'd rather go riding my bike with friends. But my mother told me later on that she remembers me being ten years old and standing at the front door telling my friends that I couldn't go out right now, that I had to practise."

His parents did what they could to encourage their son's musical ability. "It wasn't an issue for my parents," he says. "As long as I wanted to continue taking lessons, then they were willing to support it and support my private lessons."

In high school, Chris continued playing, expanding to learn how to play saxophone. That versatility, coupled with talent and practice, allowed him to play with some of the several concert and dance bands





around Hamilton. "When I was a teenager, I started to work a lot, playing in bands as an alto saxophonist who could double on clarinet. In the music of Glenn Miller, for example, they always had that lead clarinet," says Chris. "So I found that playing the saxophone and being primarily a clarinet player and being able to double like that really helped me start to work semi-professionally as a young guy."

It was around the same time that Chris also started playing with the band he would eventually inherit and plays with to this day — the Swingmasters. As a teen, Chris was also a musician in the air cadets and even taught in the cadet program during the summer.

Eager to continue his training in both jazz and classical music, Chris enrolled at St. Francis Xavier University at Antigonish, Nova Scotia, after Grade 12. When he entered university, he still wasn't sure where his musical studies would lead him. "For me, the whole goal was to study. I really didn't focus too much on any particular direction — as a performer or as a teacher."

Toward the beginning of his university career, however, Chris developed a retinal disease in his left eye, and he gradually lost all vision in the eye. Fearing that the same disease would affect his right eye, Chris was determined to finish another goal: to get his master's degree in music. He enrolled in the State University of New York, College at Potsdam to do just that. "I thought at the time that I could have done a master's degree blind, but I knew it would be much more difficult. I wanted to be able to study with my vision intact and get to the point where I could say I reached that level of academic achievement."

In 1987, after his studies, Chris turned his attention back

to the cadets and got a job in the Armed Forces reserves as a regional music director for Ontario when the army and sea cadets were expanding their music programs. He worked in that position for five years in the air force as a major. With fairly regular trips to the summer sea cadet music program at the Royal Military College, which was under his supervision, Chris was first exposed to Kingston during this time. "I used to come to Kingston, usually twice a summer, just to say 'hi' and see how things were going with the band. I always liked coming to this city."

But, Chris says, his time in the military did take away from his opportunities to perform. "I wasn't doing a lot of playing, and I must admit I missed it. That's what happens when you get a day job or an office job. I didn't get as much time to play as I would have liked. So that was a bit of an issue."

Also, while working with the young cadets, Chris became interested in getting his bachelor of education degree; he left the Armed Forces to become a teacher, studying at the University of Western Ontario in London.

Following graduation, he moved to Ottawa and quickly obtained a teaching job at St. Mark High School in Manotick. After only a few months, though, Chris found an opening for a music teacher at LaSalle; the twist was that it involved directing a new music program geared for adult and senior learners. While the prospect of teaching adults might have been daunting for other teachers, Chris jumped at the opportunity, mainly because he already had plenty of experience playing with older musicians and even directed a community concert band in Pictou County during his second year of university in Nova Scotia. "I had that in the back of my mind when the principal asked me



on the experiences in his innovative intergenerational classroom.

"I'm not really interested in how the teenagers are learning or how the seniors are learning; my big thing is the intergenerational component. It happens to be music, but it can be anything," he says. "Seniors come into a school, into an environment that's designed for teachers and adolescents, and they bring so much of a different perception and such a positive outlook. It really represents more of a community."

Despite the demands on time for both teaching and studying, Chris has plenty of other activities to keep him busy when

whether I could run an adult program. I had worked with that age group."

In the first years at LaSalle, he "straddled" his time between his adult/senior classes and his teenage classes. Then he decided to try running them together in the same room; that decision would have a profound effect on the direction of Chris's life. "As much as I could, over the next few years, I tried to integrate the age groups. The adult program was running during the day when the kids were there, so there was this wonderful mixture of seniors and teenagers learning to play music in the same environment," he says. "When you have a 75-year-old woman sitting next to a 15-year-old girl, learning to play flute, there's more than just music happening. It's absolutely phenomenal. I've been doing this for 12 years, and I'm glad I was able to help start it."

Chris also realized that what he was seeing in his classroom was something he himself had experienced when he was growing up in Hamilton. "When I was 14 years old, I played in bands with men and women who were 55 to 65. When you stand to take a solo, you are just a musician. They don't care that you are 14 or 15. There is no role play. You're all just part of a band. That, for me, was an experience I just could not replace. All of my past just came up."

Seeing the overwhelmingly positive interaction between his teenage and senior students also prompted Chris to want to dig deeper. He successfully applied to McGill University — ironically, through a connection made possible by one of his senior music students — to begin work on a Ph.D. on the topic of intergenerational interaction. He took a year off to study full-time, and he is continuing to work on his doctoral degree, based largely

he's not working. He says that he tries to get out as often as he can in his Model T Ford hot rod built for him by his brother Dave. He also enjoys beer- and wine-making. And when he's not travelling with his band of seniors to perform, he's performing himself; he's a member of a classical trio and a jazz trio with a few other Kingston musicians, and he often performs with the Northumberland Orchestra in Cobourg. One of his most enjoyable performance opportunities is playing in "pit bands" for musicals. Last year, he was a member of the band for *The Mikado*. And, of course, he and the Swingmasters — a group of seven or eight musicians who perform swing jazz classics — get together as much as possible, with a half-dozen or more shows a year.

"I sometimes get asked that," he replies when asked rhetorically whether he ever finds time for sleep. He says he's happiest when he's active, whether it's with his teaching, his music or his numerous hobbies. "You only get so much time, and there are so many things to experience. I do like to relax, but it doesn't take me long."

That's when the question of future goals comes in, the question that triggers a pause and a shrug. Besides the obvious goal of completing his studies, he offers a broad desire to see more of what he's seen in his classroom — with individuals from different backgrounds and ages interacting for their mutual benefit — elsewhere in the community. "I'd like to see more things involving all of us, together, as a community. We need a place for us to get together and enjoy each other and share our experiences, without a hierarchy — just a place where people can have an extended association. When you see that happening, it's very uplifting." ■