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NFHS spring concert is finale for Jack Prybylski

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Michele DeLuca/staff Niagara Falls High School music teacher Jack Prybylski will conduct his last student concert tonight as he is set to retire at the end of this school year.

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Niagara Gazette



The lively beat of the jazz band filled the halls of Niagara Falls High School recently as music teacher Jack Prybylski prepared students for tonight's spring concert, Prybylski's last show of his career.

Prybylski has dedicated just over 30 years to teaching music in the district. Longtime colleagues say his contagious passion for music and his natural ability to connect with students will be greatly missed.

"Jack always finds ways to get the kids fired up about what they're doing," said James Spanbauer, the current principal of LaSalle Middle School who worked with Prybylski at NFHS for 13 years. "Along with being a gifted teacher he's also a very gifted musician. His love for music inspires kids to explore their own passions and motivates them to perform at a high level."

Prybylski began his teaching career in 1983 at Maple Avenue Elementary School. Since then he has worked throughout the district at Kalfas Elementary, 60th Street Elementary, GJ Mann Elementary, Gaskill Junior High, and LaSalle Senior High.

When Niagara Falls High School opened in 2000, Prybylski joined teams with longtime friend Paul Wos who was then the music director at the old NFHS to pioneer the music program. Over the course of 12 years the two worked side-by-side in their shared office as they lead the symphonic, jazz, marching, and pep bands.

Fueled by their shared love for music the two emphasized the importance of commitment and proficiency in playing an instrument with students but also taught the importance of enjoying the music they're creating. This philosophy allowed Prybylski to create and maintain strong relationships with students throughout the years.

"To describe Jack in four words, he is professional, personable, cooperative, and understanding. When he works with students he puts himself in their positions and looks at things through their eyes to see what types of things they're going through and get a better understanding of them. This is an important way to be as a teacher and I think that's why Jack has always bonded with his students," said Wos.

Prybylski's love for music began when he was just seven years old and picked up the saxophone for the first time. Since then he's never put it down. When he's not in the classroom Jack is playing a show with his band or working on recording a CD.

"I've always admired Jack for being a working musician in addition to being a teacher. He's teaching you about music and he's actually playing, so he's able to bring that real world experience back to students in the classroom," said Rich Meranto, media education director at NFHS.

For Prybylski, the most rewarding part of his work is the ability to be a first hand witness of the progression of his students through daily rehearsals.

"Seeing the students develop and progress as musicians, seeing them get the enjoyment and emotional qualities of the music and the realization that it's more than just notes and rhythms that they're creating something greater, as they get past the point of technical and get to being expressive with a piece of music, that for me is the best part of the job," he said.

Prybylski encourages students to continue their development as musicians even after graduation.

“Jack’s legacy is that a lot of kids continue to play music after they graduate high school. Whether as a career or simply recreational they keep picking up their instruments and that has a lot to do with the experience they had here with Mr. Ski,” said Wos.

As former students continue their music endeavors, they often come back to their roots and connect with Prybylski and the band.

“If students are home on break from college they’ll come back to visit Mr. Ski, or if the band is traveling for an out of town performance and a former student goes to college in that area they will come and play with the band. That’s the type of teacher Mr. Ski is. As a district we’ve been fortunate to have him as a teacher and for him to share his love of music. He’s going to be missed,” said Spanbauer.

Prybylski’s spirit and innate enthusiasm for his work is noticeable whether he’s on stage conducting a performance or inside the classroom walls working with his students.

“When you watch Jack perform it’s really cool to see the stage presence he has. As a teacher sometimes you have to be a bit of a showman to entertain and motivate the kids. Jack brings that level of fun outside of the classroom and in the performances. There are times he’s very serious but he knows how to enjoy time with the kids,” said Meranto.

“They love listening to Mr. Ski play his saxophone. Whenever he takes it out to model the correct way to play something the kids are always impressed and inspired at his skill,” said Brian Chmaj who is in his second year of working with the 9th grade concert band at NFHS.

Prybylski gives recognition to his colleagues throughout the district who work with students at the elementary and middle school levels. Without their dedication and hard work, he says, the music program would not be where it is today.

“They motivate the young children to play and give them all the basics they need so when they come here it’s easy to take the player to a new level; to be more artistic and expressive, and they have a solid core foundation. That’s why the program here works,” he said.

Prybylski plans to enjoy his retirement by continuing to perform and record music, and hopes to make travel plans for Europe.

IF YOU GO • WHAT: Retirement concert for Niagara Falls High School music teacher Jack Prybylski • WHEN: 7 p.m. today • WHERE: Niagara Falls High School Performing Arts Center

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