

ROBERT FLOYD RETIREMENT KEYNOTE

TMEA GENERAL SESSION

February 8, 2024

Good Morning! Wow! Thanks so much. So appreciated.

It has come to mind that if you have not served on the Executive or State Board, you haven't really heard me say much if anything at all. All you know me by is the 20-year-old picture in *Southwestern Musician*.

I did tell the Board several months ago that I did have a few thoughts to share with the membership. A month later I got a call from Dana and she said I have a question for you, but I do not want an answer now, because I knew you would say no. Then she proceeded to say that the Executive Board had decided that I would give the keynote at the Thursday general session. She was right about saying no. There is a difference in sharing a few thoughts versus giving the major keynote.

Well, you're going to hear from me today. Think of the amazing keynote speakers you have heard during our general sessions through the years, and you got stuck with me. I'm so sorry.

I must say I have been thinking about what to share for quite a while. I am not blessed with keynote presentation skills as you have already observed. By the way, do you know how intimidating it is to attempt a keynote speech with Dr. Tim sitting in the third row?

Tim and I text or email quite often, but usually it has been not about music education but our dogs, Cameron and Sammy, and the lessons in life we learned from them.

About three weeks ago I texted Tim and said I am freaking out. Would you be willing to write my speech? He texted back in about thirty seconds and said read from the phone book. They will applaud you. Then he texted three words of advice. He simply said, "tell your story." Not sure how exciting telling my story will be, but I must say I am the luckiest guy on the planet to have taught for 26 years in a wonderful music program and spent another almost thirty-one in my position at TMEA.

My comments this morning will not be so much about TMEA, or my work at the capitol but more about my time teaching and our mission to serve you and the 5.4 million students in our Texas schools. Because you see, I am still a teacher at heart. If you are interested in those and other topics, come tomorrow at 4:00 and we will informally delve into the madness at the capital and any other topic you might have an interest. Though there are days when we are not so sure, we do have the best job on the planet. Touching children's lives through music, there is no profession that can be more rewarding. During the pandemic and months of virtual learning, students did not miss their math teacher—they missed you.

Did you ever think about the decisions you made along the way that had a major impact on where you are today? We will come back to that later. As for me, in college I went from pre-med at SMU for two years to earning a degree in mathematics, with all my electives in advanced business, and then to graduate school in statistics—how sick was that—but I was so close to pursuing that as my career. It was the first day of classes for graduate school when I changed my major to music education, and it took me two more years to get an undergraduate degree, including 65 more hours and lots more money. Before that 8:00 AM class began on the first day of the semester, and the professor arrived, I got up, walked out of the room, and headed across campus to the Owen Fine Arts Center and began my journey to become a music educator. But I still shudder to think about what if I had not made that move. Admittedly, I would not have waited that long, but who wants to follow their brother their whole life, which I had done since fourth grade?

When I started band in fourth grade, as Dick said, we shared the same clarinet that first year - but I did get my own mouthpiece and reeds. I followed him into high school band, to SMU, and into the Mustang Band, the Symphonic Band, and into music education and probably would have chosen that path earlier in my college days but felt I needed to be my own person! But Dick has always been a role model for me in our profession, always on the cutting edge in repertoire, and he is still as passionate about teaching, conducting, rehearsing, and music making today as he was his first year to teach.

If I had not made that move, Berkner High School would still have had amazing directors and programs and TMEA would have had wonderful leadership these past 31 years, but that was life changing for me in more than one way.

On the last day of May in 1992, my phone rang in my office at Berkner High School. It was Bill Cormack, my predecessor at TMEA. He simply said, “where is your stuff?” I said, “what stuff?” He responded, “to apply for my job.” I answered, “Bill, am not going to apply for your job. I am a teacher, and I am not done yet.” But reluctantly I typed out a letter and bio and dropped it in the mail. It was the deadline to apply. I did not hear anything for four months, but early in September I got a call to come to Austin to interview with the Executive Board along with several other amazing candidates. The next day I got a call from the TMEA president offering me the position, which I accepted under the premise that I could help more students simply at a different level. I stayed at Berkner that school year and moved in June of 1993 to take over the reins of TMEA.

There was a second divine intervention. In the beginning of my TMEA career I got married, and between their mother and I we raised the two most amazing children any parents could ever hope for. Unfortunately, they never knew me as a teacher, and Michael one day told me, Dad, you don’t do anything but send emails and talk on the phone. There is a lot of truth to that, but hopefully I have done a bit more than that, and he gets that now. They are here today, and I want to recognize Michael, computer engineer immersed in Artificial Intelligence and starting

his own company, and Lauren, already knocking it out of the park in her career in technology systems sales. Would you stand?

So, there is no lecture today, but it is no secret to you that the general public, the legislature included, does not always perceive a difference in the curricular class called music and the extra-curricular components of competitions and half-time shows. Even our Commissioner of Education calls us the fun stuff. I actually am good with that, but that cannot be the end of the story of what we do.

As a result, I do believe there are three critical components I want to emphasize that are important to protecting music education in our state moving forward:

- 1) Do all in your power to make music in your school and community the academic discipline we profess it to be. We must continue to fly the flag for that message. That is always my priority at the capitol. The law is clear. Sometimes the legislature should follow their own laws and not just pass more of them.
- 2) Strive to do everything in your power to instill in your students a love of music. That is what got us into this profession. We have high performance standards, and that is admirable, but it can be a fine line to step across that leads to burn out of our students by focusing so much time on the perfection of the quality of the music performance for honor band or orchestra or another convention invitation recording that we completely erode the wonderful feelings that our students gained from the music preparation and performance. I made that mistake one time and vowed I would never do it again.
- 3) Respect your students' time, personal life, and family commitments. Of course, you must have student responsibilities and policies to guide your program, but appreciate the fact that music is not the only thing in their lives. Let us each make sure that our program serves students for all the right reasons. Think how much more stress students are under today compared to the early to mid-eighties, and we should not be adding to it.

Tim shared with me in one conversation that in his travels around the country he had witnessed some incredible teaching and programs, but that there was also a mindset by some that "Woe is me. The sky is falling, and I am down and can never get up."

We all get that way at times. With cuts in funding for public education, staffing, emphasis on state accountability, pulling students from our rehearsals to do more practice drill for the test in spite of what the law says, and parents who would rather find an excuse for their child not meeting their obligations to a program than kick them in the butt and tell them to get to work, there can be challenges. I know we have all been there and can relate.

I remember as a young teacher I used to come home from a rough day depressed and demoralized and wake up in the night shaking from the experience. It not only impacted me

emotionally but physically as well. It might have been an altercation with a student or simply a noisy, ineffective rehearsal, but I could not get beyond it.

What I never seemed to realize or remember was the little clarinet player in beginning band who got over the break the first time and went home floating, or I forgot that for the first time that one phrase we had been working on for three weeks magically captured the message the composer intended, and there was a smile on every face in the room. We must not let one unfortunate event in a day ruin the good things that may have happened.

But as I got older, I began to restore some balance to the happenings of a day of teaching and triggered a more positive outcome by my students over time, and as a result letters and cards began to trickle in from former students reflecting on their experiences in our program while in high school. In the early days it was a shoe box that grew to a box about so, full of letters, cards, and pictures. So when things were tough, I would dig into the cardboard box and read comments from former students. From time to time, I still pull that tattered box from the closet to throw it away and two hours later I am sitting on the floor reading through its contents and, you guessed it, end up shoving it back in the closet to dispose of at a later time. I need inspiration and motivation too!

If you have been in this profession a while, you know what I am talking about. If you are a young teacher, those times will come.

At the capitol when you testify before the House or Senate Education committee, they give you two minutes to make your point, and then tell you do not read to us, we can read. Tell us a story. But I have two stories to share today from my own experiences that carry the heart and the message of what I want your takeaway to be. These are my favorites.

The first was a letter dated May 27, 1985, from a single parent elementary principal whose son played clarinet in third band, who struggled musically and socially throughout high school. She wrote, *“Your own sense of caring and your willingness to work with individuals has been so very appreciated. Realizing that you are a man with high goals and pride in the band’s musical accomplishments, I am particularly grateful for your willingness to continue to encourage a young man who certainly was not first band first chair, but a young man who so very desperately needed some of the involvement and the support that groups such as the music ensembles can give so beautifully. So, whenever you get discouraged (and I know you will), whenever you are tempted to cut students (and I’m sure that you are), whenever you are wondering if those early hours and those long days and those harried rehearsals are worth it, I hope that you will think of the Davids whose lives you have touched and continue to touch.”*

This letter reshaped my philosophy for the remainder of my teaching years – to offer every student in our program my best and kept me grounded for many years after that. With a similar message, a member told me this past spring that his enrollment in his program had dropped significantly during the pandemic, but he realized that the students in his program deserved his

best efforts, and thus far teaching this semester has been a joy for him.

A second email came in 2007 from a former student who was in my band my first year at Berkner, and he was asking me if I could tell him the name of a composition in which he played snare drum at contest that year and help him get a recording. Even though he butchered the spelling unmercifully, I recognized it was the Persichetti Symphony, so I sent him the name along with the Berkner recording on which he was performing. In a return email he told me that he still took strength from how scared he would get in those opening few bars when he played the snare drum part and how he still took strength from that experience in learning to overcome his fears.

I emailed him back and asked him what he did now, assuming it was some kind of engineering position in a technical field of sorts. When he responded, he said that he had gone to medical school and now specialized in trauma surgery and surgical critical care and taught surgery at the University of North Carolina Medical School. *"I have often thought back on those days of being pushed to grow beyond natural talents (or as I often like to say, "to be educated beyond my intelligence") as being influential in meeting those challenges I was faced with while developing in my chosen profession. I still find myself in the operating room, standing over a patient with all the varied staff in support of what I am trying to accomplish, thinking back on those days performing with the band as a source of confidence. It's not a big leap, really..."*

The beauty of this story is that this former student did not email initially to thank me for creating a work ethic and commitment to get him through med school or a delicate surgery. He reached out to me to inquire about a piece of music that had touched his heart 25 years earlier.

Those times, and your influence provided qualities that I doubt any of us would have ever anticipated. I am sure many others would have similar stories to tell. Now he is planning a room on his house to accommodate his new drum set and the noise to appease his wife.

So, what is the point? We all know we did not get into this profession to raise a math score, or improve a STAAR test performance, or create a work ethic perhaps not experienced in any other classroom, but we know those things are true, and in these days when those skills are invaluable, it is worthy of including in our advocacy message. I do that at the capitol but return at the end of the conversation reminding them of the academic nature of music and the impact we have on a child's life.

So, I hope you will not take these stories to be self-congratulatory, but rather a reminder that you touch not just our students' minds but their heart and soul and human spirit through the nature of the subject we teach. Cherish the accolades and reminders to inspire and motivate you in these continued challenging times. These days will pass.

So, I fibbed a bit. I would like to share a couple more stories. With all the emphasis on high stakes testing and cuts in arts programs, the creative component of education is disappearing in

many classrooms. We all know that. And if we believe Dan Pink, New York Times best seller author of “A Whole New Mind, Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future,” the kingdom is changing hands, and the future belongs to a different kind of right brain thinker to fill the 21st century jobs in this country. My first story is about Lauren. Sorry, Lauren! I did not warn her about this.

When Lauren was in the first grade, I remember asking her when she came home from school one day what fine arts class she liked the best. We had the luxury of our children attending school where there was a music, art, and theatre specialist on every elementary campus. She thought a minute, looked up at me with those big green eyes, and said, “Daddy, it’s theatre arts.” Of course, I was a bit taken back and bit my tongue because I hoped she would say music! She has a beautiful voice and sang in the Austin Children’s Choir. I regained my composure and asked her why and she looked at me with those big eyes again, and said, “Because in third grade, daddy, we get to sew a hand puppet.”

As a first grader she was already thinking about her hand puppet, what it would look like, what kind of character it would be, what emotions it might express, what colors she would use, what materials. It was all about her chance to be creative and let her imagination carry her to a new world. It was not about more math practice sheets and more spelling words to memorize. Of course, all those things are important, but she was in the moment fixated on designing and making her own hand puppet.

Fast forward to eighteen months later. Lauren was singing a song she had learned in music class. At dinner that night she suddenly blurted out that tomorrow in school was going to be a great day. When I inquired, she responded, “Because tomorrow I am going to get to start sewing my hand puppet.” She had been looking forward to this day since first grade. The arts and creativity certainly resonate with young children, don’t they?

And I would be remiss if I did not both recognize and sing the praises of our unsung heroes in our profession, the elementary music teacher. They are my heroes, and I tell them that every opportunity I get.

So, I have a question for you. You heard my story, but how did you get here today? Who put that little voice in your head that this is a profession you should choose to follow? Like me, think how close you came to not pursuing teaching as a career? So when things get tough, close your eyes and think about that moment and that person, or persons, who influenced you to enter this most honored of professions, and let it quietly remind you of the why, and to remember the hundreds of students whose lives you have influenced throughout your career.

And for those few students with whom we have encounters that may not have ended as we hoped, there are hundreds of students out there whose lives were positively impacted by you that you may never know about.

And for those challenging encounters, you have already heard my Frank Ticheli story. Frank stole my thunder in his testimonial, and the next Frank Ticheli may be sitting in your classroom today.

And Frank, who planned to be here today until about three weeks ago when his February travel schedule became a bit overwhelming, dedicated his first published piece to myself and the Berkner Band, (it was an ok piece...actually a great piece, *Fortress*. If you do not know it, band directors, you should take a look). Here is how he signed the score: *Bob*, (he has not called me Mr. Floyd since 1987, so the respect is gone) *please accept this dedication of gratitude for all your guidance, patience, and inspiration during my "wild and confused" high school years. I hope you enjoy the piece and watch out...there's more to come.* Boy, that's the understatement of the century! I love you, Frank!

I get asked fairly often, why are the music programs so good in Texas? I love that question. I share a few thoughts that really originate with riding the coattails of football in the early days in the small towns as well as metropolitan areas across Texas. Every town and every high school campus that had a football program, their local school board had to have a band for Friday night football games. So, band, choir, and orchestra programs over the years have benefited from what originated as band programs, and really all fine arts as well over the years.

Certainly, other reasons have contributed to our success—Colleges and universities in our state that trained us, a legislature that we have to set straight every now and then, but overall have consistently included fine arts as a part of a well-rounded education in Texas, local administrations that support our programs, and certainly the UIL standard we all strive to attain for over 60 years through the Concert and Sightreading Evaluation program.

But do you know what is different about Texas? Lots of states have pockets here and there of outstanding programs and music ensembles, but what has changed over the years in our state, where we too had districts with wonderful music ensembles, today there are thousands, and I do mean thousands, of music ensembles, elementary through college, a reflection of quality teaching at a level that only keeps getting better. And most importantly, with a priority of capturing the spirit of the music and the composer's intent. It makes me so proud.

So where are we going and what does the future hold for us in music education in our state? What will music education be like in five years? In ten? Those are unknowns in 2024. But what I do know is this. I could not be prouder, nor survived for 31 years in this position without such amazing leadership through the years by Executive Boards that have guided our association as well as a staff that I am so proud I have had the privilege of hiring. There are ten of us today in the office. They truly are the magic that keeps this association going, and I am so indebted to their contributions to TMEA's success. And with Joe Munoz taking on the role of Executive Director July 1, a new rudder will be guiding the TMEA ship. We are in great hands for the future!

So, while watching a Christmas eve service late in the evening this past December the pastor from a large church on the east coast anchored his message on a line from a Henry David Thoreau quote in which he shared, *"It's not so much what we look at in life that matters, it is what we see."* Boy, did that resonate with me as I began to put my thoughts together for this morning. What do you see when you look at your program, your ensemble, a struggling student, a new position you may be considering, an administration that sadly has no understanding of the value of what students experience in your classroom. Is it an opportunity or a dead-end street? I remember a highly successful choir director in our state who told me he built and sustained a choir program from students placed in his choir to meet the fine arts graduation requirement. It truly is what we see, and what we do with it, not what we are looking at.

In the end, quality teachers are motivated by passion and a moral sense of mission and commitment, and not discouraged by the challenges we face in our jobs on what can be a day-to-day basis. We represent a shared humanity. Our mission is not to segregate but to unite and to serve every student that walks through the door of our classrooms equally as defined in our code of ethics. We are in the life saving business.

I am compelled to go off script to say that through my experiences what warms my heart are the stories I hear every day about how you serve students in your classroom. Here are a few: watching a national merit scholar march beside a student with a learning disability an entire season, a student with down syndrome playing wood block in the pit, back in the fall, on the Austin news one night a story about three trumpet players who had devised a way to connect themselves and march an eight-minute UIL performance flawlessly playing every note, and by the way, the middle trumpet player was blind. Another student pushing his friend in a wheelchair through the drill without missing a beat at UIL State Marching Contest.

After the Executive Board selects the four five-year \$12,500 scholarships, I always call the principal of those schools on Monday morning and congratulate them. They love good news, as you know. So, after two days when I had not connected with one of the principals, I called the teacher. I gave her the good news, and she was momentarily quiet. I could sense she had started crying. I said, "He must be a wonderful student." She said, *yes, he is one of my drum majors, and after a slight pause, she said, "He's homeless. If he did not have music in his life, I do not know where he would be. He just moves around to different families."*

Just last week a two, almost three-year All-State choir member performed the national anthem for the TASA Midwinter Conference in Austin for 3,000 upper-level administrators from across Texas. I got to select her based on her multi-year all-state status. After assurance from her teacher that she could do it, as the call ended, he said I will come with her and help her out on the stage because she is blind, and we learned her audition music these past three years through braille. And finally, the orchestra teacher who started a Giving Bach program working with special needs children and never looked back in and is building an inclusive orchestra on her campus. The stories go on and on. That's who you are, and that's what you do, and every

teacher in this theatre has those stories that I just shared. I applaud you and admire you so much.

So, you heard all the stuff about why Texas music programs are so successful, and they are all true. But in the end it is you, the teacher, that makes the difference, and at the risk of waxing philosophical, you understand life and teaching are not about taking, but about giving, sharing, loving, caring, and being thankful for the blessings we receive in touching children's lives through the art form we love so much – through music.

It has been an honor to serve you and the students you teach throughout my journey these past 31 years. It has been a great ride, and I am not quite done yet! And as I said in a recent magazine column, when things get tough, keep your head down and teach...and save another life. Thank you so much.