

MacKay fondly remembered as finest school band teacher

Musician died Monday at age 80

By STEPHEN PEDERSEN Arts Reporter

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If people took musicians as seriously as they take politicians, Ron MacKay would be staring down at us from a plinth, a stone baton in his hand, and a firm downbeat on his mind.

MacKay died on Monday. He was 80. In the last 30 years he fought off two heart attacks and lived with diabetes. But pancreatic cancer, diagnosed six months ago, finally took him from us.

Longtime music educator and Cobequid Education Centre band teacher Ron MacKay, shown here in March 2005, died Monday from pancreatic cancer. (Eric Wynne / Staff)

He was, without a doubt, the finest school band teacher of our time. Ask anybody. Ask any one of dozens of working professional musicians who emerged from his band program in Truro beginning in the mid-'60s to confirm the fact. To ask the question is to open a floodgate of reminiscences.

"I was in Ron's Truro band program from Grade 7 to the end of high school," said 1981 Cobequid Educational Centre grad Jack Brownell on Wednesday. Brownell is a professional Halifax tuba player, composer, conductor, record producer and music educator.

"Truro was a small town," he said. "There were no private teachers for every instrument. The biggest thing coming out of that band program, right from beginner band in Grade 7 to senior concert band in Grade 12, was Ron's work ethic."

"He was always at it non-stop, day in, day out, on weekends. At lunch break he didn't want to go off to the faculty room with the other teachers. He would grab a bite of a sandwich and give you a lesson or listen to a group of you, tell you what he thought.

"The guy just went all the time from beginner band in Grade 7 all the way through to the high school senior concert band at the top. You have to realize that these were award-winning bands, literally the best in Canada.

"He inspired us. We would joke that we used to go to classes to break up the time between band rehearsals."

Born in 1928, MacKay started taking lessons at the age of 10. He studied at the Canadian Armed Forces School of Music, and later at St. Francis Xavier University and Dalhousie University. He joined the Royal Canadian Navy in 1946, and for 20 years played in the Armed Forces Band as a horn player, bandmaster, and instructor, rising to the rating of Chief Petty Officer 2.

His professional career as a French horn player included the Halifax Opera Company, Halifax Symphonists, CBC Orchestra (Halifax), the Halifax Symphony Orchestra and Victoria Symphony Orchestra. He retired from the Armed Forces Band in 1966 and began a career in music education as an instrumental music teacher in Truro, where, as director of the Cobequid Educational Centre Symphonic Band and its feeder programs from Grades 4 through 12, he developed one of the more prominent school bands in the Atlantic Provinces.

Brownell said that MacKay influenced everyone, even those who did not develop music careers, with his high standard of professionalism.

John Fuming, a trumpet player in the Stadacona Band of the Canadian Armed Forces, based in Halifax, went all the way through MacKay's Truro music program from Grade 5 onwards. MacKay did not bat an eye in recognizing Cuming's talent despite his age. At age 12 (Grade 7) he was invited into the senior band. He traveled with them to Expo 67.

"If it wasn't for him I certainly wouldn't be where I am," Cuming said Wednesday. "Ron had so many ideas going on all the same time. We used to sell rags we got from Stanfield's underwear factory. We put them in bags. Phil Gray drew a caricature of a tiger. We put that in the bag. We called them Tiger Rags and went door to door selling them for a buck to raise money for the band."

MacKay had a simple philosophy of teaching. In a 2005 interview with The Chronicle Herald he summed it up: "I teach the person to teach themselves. They are their best teacher."

A gathering of family and friends to celebrate Ron's life will be held in Cole Harbour Funeral Home, 1234 Cole Harbour Rd., on Friday. Visitation from 1 to 3 p.m.

A memorial service will be held at 3 p.m. with a reception to follow.

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RON MACKAY - Music educator