

Charlie Buck passes final exam

*Band teacher finishes career with a bang.
And a trumpet. And a whistle. And a weird bassoon noise.*

Creig P. Sherburne of the Atascadero News
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ATASCADERO — It is impossible to estimate the how far and wide an impact Charlie Buck has made in his 31-year career at Atascadero Unified School District. He has taught thousands of student the joy of music. He has bent over backwards to bring music to those who might never have played an instrument otherwise. He gave former students a place to play after their school careers have ended. And he gave self-described band nerds permission to be themselves, and a stage upon which they could shine.

“Students I get from Charlie are really fundamentally sound musicians,” Atascadero High School Band Director Nate Conrad said. “He has a joy for playing music and he shares that with his students.”

Conrad said that Buck was his band teacher from fifth- through eighth-grades. Trombone was his specialty in those days. These days, he instructs students in every aspect of the marching band and Buck is Conrad’s coworker, and also his teacher.

“[Buck] was my teacher when I was learning trombone,” Conrad said. “But for the last six years, he has been this solid colleague who has great advice and is super dependable. He’s the one person who’s really kept the music program solid for 31 years.”

Buck finished a strong career with one of the strongest presentations he is a part of. At the end of every school year, Buck conducts a joint concert made up of the Atascadero Junior High School Band and the Atascadero Community Band — he is director of both, and an uncountable number of students have gone on to join the community band over the years.

One of those is Justin Larson, a junior at AHS. He said that Buck was his teacher all the way back in elementary school. He was already a member of the Atascadero community band when he heard something that would change his musical career.

“I walked in the AJHS band room and heard this weird farting sound,” Larson said. “I asked the gentleman what the instrument was. He told me it was a bassoon. The first thought was, ‘what the heck is a bassoon?’”

The gentleman was Buck and at the joint concert on Wednesday evening, Larson’s primary instrument was the bassoon.

“The best thing about Charlie is he picks music that we can do and music we can’t do, and he makes us do it,” Larson said.

The concert at AJHS was filled with moving and excellently performed music, including a medley of themes from “Jurassic Park,” “Superman,” “Star Wars” and “Indiana Jones,” which earned the bands colossal applause and which many spectators later said sounded better than the originals.

In between pieces, Buck departed from the norm and spoke candidly with the audience about his career.

Out of college, Buck said, he knew he wanted to work on the West Coast, but it wasn’t a good time to look for a band director job.

“I remember sending out something like 300 letters to various districts between Orange County and Seattle,” Buck said. “Out of 300, I got three interviews.”

One of those interviews was at AUSD. He got the job and, at 24, he was only about five years older than his oldest students. One of those students was drum major Dan Spickert, whom Buck said was an excellent leader and all around good guy.

“Some years later, I get this boy flute player, his name was Raymond Spickert,” Buck said. “And he says ‘hi, you had my dad in band.’ I really felt old. ... And then a few years ago I got wind that there was this trumpet player whose name was Carson Spickert. I thought, ‘It couldn’t be.’ It was!”

It goes without saying that, thanks to the Spickert family, Buck has taught three generations of Atascaderans, all of whom were at Buck’s final AJHS performance — Carson was even in the band.

Another audience member was Sean McAlpine, a fellow who has the use of only one hand. In 1989, his mother Yolanda said, Sean wanted to try playing music, but it was a difficult thing for him. Buck’s solution was to weld a trumpet to a music stand so that Yolanda’s disabled son could play.

“As a mom, it meant the world,” Yolanda said.

Buck also thanked his wife — a woman he met on his only blind date ever — and AHJS Principal Lori Thomas-Hicks, who, while in eighth-grade, was in Buck’s very first band class at AJHS.

“I began and ended my career with her in my band and her as my boss,” Buck said, hugging an emotional Thomas-Hicks.

Buck will direct the community band through the summer’s Tuesday Evenings in the Park concerts — after which, somebody else will direct the band, though who hasn’t been decided yet — but his future following that isn’t clear. What is clear, however, is that even though it can never be quantified, Buck’s impact on Atascadero have been huge.

“He walked into a band that was very dysfunctional,” Dan Spickert said. “he was fresh and full of everything. He taught us to dance.”