

Just the sax, ma'am

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Creig P. Sherburne/Atascadero News

• Joyce Rabellino with her baritone saxophone. She has a lifelong love of music, and plays with the Atascadero Community Band as well as two sax quartets, Sax Appeal and Four Belles.

When Atascadero resident Joyce Rabellino picked up the clarinet in sixth grade, there's no way she could have known that 40 years later, she would be a part of one of the most celebrated bands in San Luis Obispo County.

But that's exactly the situation she's in, though she has since traded the clarinet for the baritone saxophone, which she plays as part of the Atascadero Community Band.

In fact, her life in music started many years before she was even born.

"My grandmother went to the New England Conservatory in 1920," Rabellino said. "She played cello and organ at her church for more than 60 years."

That grandmother later retired from playing the organ at the age of 90, but that was so she could focus on conducting the choir, Rabellino added.

Rabellino herself took piano lessons beginning at the age of 6. In junior high school, she said, she picked up the clarinet because she didn't want to play the same instruments as her older sisters. Besides, the band director needed more woodwinds.

That changed in high school when she joined the jazz band.

“They didn’t want woodwinds, they wanted saxophones,” Rabellino said with a smile.

So she switched and has played the sax ever since.

It wasn’t a very difficult change, she said, because the keys on a clarinet and a sax are very similar. The biggest change for her was the mouthpiece. The way one blows into a clarinet is very different from the way one blows into a sax. But she plays with at least two sax quartets and [the community](#) band, so it can’t have been that difficult.

What was difficult, she said, was having kids. She’s got two very successful children. Lia, 21, and Sam, 18. She said that both of her children played music under Atascadero Junior High School band director Charlie Buck — the same Charlie Buck, in fact, who directs Rabellino as part of the Atascadero Community Band.

Lia is now more into the visual arts than music, but Rabellino said that Sam got his [start](#) with the trumpet and moved to the tuba when the tuba players were promised doughnuts every Friday in Buck’s band class. He’s now a guitar player and heading off to college. Rabellino’s pride in her children is plain as day when she speaks about them.

But it was those kids that made playing with any consistency difficult for her. Being married, working and raising two kids isn’t easy, and music sort of fell by the wayside for a few years.

During that hiatus, though, she said she kept busy. One project was with the Girl Scouts. Back in those days, her troop did a lot of work Stadium Park. So when it got a grand re-opening and the Atascadero Community Band played there, Rabellino knew she just had to be a part of that.

It felt good, but it would take another five years before her kids were old enough to be left to their own devices in the evenings so she could go play some music.

“I felt like I could commit the time again,” she said.

And so she did. After all, there’s nothing like making music with others. It’s one of the best parts about being in the band, she said.

“Part of what I get out of it is I can sit at home and play my sax; that’s good, but when you get a bunch of people like me together, you can make a sound that’s so big and chill-inducing,” she said.

A great example of that, she said, was when the Community Band played at the Atascadero Lake Park for the Fourth of July. They had a trumpeter play Taps over the rest of the music. She said that seeing men and women stand up, remove their hats and put hands over their hearts — it was a moving experience for her.

“Tears were streaming down my face,” she said. “not only was the music beautiful, but it touched the audience. It makes us feel good, but it also makes other people feel good.”

And the very nature of the Atascadero Community Band means that just about anybody can experience that feeling. The band has at least one mother-daughter duo — both of whom were taught by director Buck — and it’s not uncommon to see a teen play music while sitting next to somebody 10 years retired.

Rabellino said that the band's youngest member began when he was in fifth grade. But he was good and he was serious, so it worked.

Older musicians mentor the younger, Rabellino said, but "the younger people bring in a spark of youth."

It's also worth noting that Rabellino and the rest of the band don't earn a cent playing with the band. Each member supplies his or her own instrument and uniform. For many performances, they bring their own music stands, as well. So while the band collects donations, those donations are used to cover operational costs. Those costs include registering the band's trailer and buying new music, for instance.

When the band plays concerts and charges for tickets, usually at Atascadero Bible Church, the money earned goes toward North County nonprofits, including ECHO, Toys for Tots, Loaves & Fishes and many others.

Rabellino also plays in a couple of sax quartets: Sax Appeal and Four Belles. She said that those quartets do a lot of charity work as well.

"We play nursing homes, cancer walks... it's really rewarding," she said. "They are such an awesome audience. Money couldn't pay for that."

Another thing [money](#) just can't pay for is the friends that Rabellino has made through music. Her best friends in the world are also in her section of the band. Sometimes they'll all gather together to get as many saxophones in the same room as they can, and sometimes they get together for barbecues and parties — not to play music — because that's what friends do.

Rabellino will not play at Tuesday in the Park on July 24 because she'll be with her son at his college orientation. But if you'd like to see her play her huge Yamaha saxophone, she'll be back on July 31. And Sax Appeal will play on Saturday, July 14 from 1 to 4 p.m. at D'Anbino Cellars in Paso Robles. There's a \$5 fee for non-members, but she said most people should go. The band really has sax appeal.