

First Cole Porter Scholarship Recipient Gives Back to Community

Dr. Peggy Bennett remembers the day 40 years ago, when her band director Jim Noble called her into his office.

"He told me that Peru High School was 'putting all their eggs in one basket' and nominating me alone for the newly established Cole Porter Scholarship," Bennett reminisced.

The day finally came when she would audition and interview for the scholarship, just as Noble told her she would. Bennett performed her Telemann flute solo and then sat down with the panel for an interview. The panel of judges included area superintendents that year.

"That was a time when Vietnam was a hugely volatile topic, and one of the superintendents asked me what I thought of 'long hair.' In those days, long hair was often seen as a sign of rebelliousness and opposition to the war," Bennett said. "Not until I got in the middle of my response (explaining that I preferred shorter hair, but certainly not a buzz cut) did I realize that the superintendent asking the question was indeed sporting a buzz cut. I thought that my selection was doomed after that faux pas!"

It was far from doomed however. Bennett was selected to be the first Cole Porter Scholarship Recipient. She would be the first of her family to attend college. Since her family did not have the money to send her to college, the scholarship was what made it possible.

"The PHS administration announced to the entire school that I had won the scholarship. To have the news broadcast to all my supportive classmates lent such an air of celebration to the entire school; it brings tears to my eyes still," Bennett said.

Her mother saved every newspaper item, congratulatory note and all correspondence from those days. Bennett keeps them in a scrapbook; among the bits of paper from this memorable time is a very special note from Jim Noble.

"Jim Noble, our beloved 'Nobe,' taught all the music classes at Peru High School," Bennett explained. "Nobe was THE director for marching band, symphonic band, stage (jazz) band, choir, swing choir and the annual musical. He did everything."

She was in all music ensembles, except swing choir, from 1964-1967. Because of Noble's prompting, she joined a flute quartet that played frequently for concerts, played solos in competitions, studied flute with a professional flautist from the Indianapolis symphony, began teaching flute to junior high students, auditioned for music scholarships, and planned on a career in music education.

"Nobe was passionate, funny, devoted, talented, charming, and an extraordinary musician," Bennett recalled. "He saw talent in us that we didn't yet see in ourselves, and he encouraged us to pursue excellence. We flourished under his leadership and had terrific musical groups."



Noble's ongoing encouragement and support of Bennett paid off. She not only graduated from Ball State University with a Bachelors of Science degree in music education, but she also earned her Master of Arts in music education there as well. She went on to the University of North Texas where she earned her Doctorate of Philosophy in Music Education.

Dr. Peggy Bennett is currently a professor of music education at Oberlin Conservatory of Music. She spends her summers in Montana at her home there. While it's been many years since she's returned to Peru, she has not forgotten her hometown.

One evening while watching a PBS special on Cole Porter, Bennett felt compelled to Google the Cole Porter Scholarship, to let them know how the first Miami County recipient was doing. Some twist of fate brought her to the Miami County Community Foundation's web site. While the foundation does not administer the Cole Porter Scholarship, Associate Director Jenni Marsh knew who did, and she connected Bennett with Joey Cole Kubesch.

The correspondence that followed between the three ladies, led to a terrific gift for Miami County. Bennett created a permanently endowed fund through the Community Foundation to celebrate the teacher who so inspired her and the family who helped her realize her educational dreams. She created the James Noble Fund, to help support the ongoing needs of the Cole Porter birthplace.

"I will be forever grateful to the Cole family for supporting a 17 year-old aspiring musician to realize her dreams," Bennett commented. "Nobe was a pivotal person in my formative years. I am so grateful that he saw in me the possibilities that I did not yet recognize in myself."

Bennett said she thought that having a fund named in his honor would probably embarrass Noble, who passed away suddenly in the 1970s.

"He would most likely down-play what he did," Bennett remarked. "But his role in my life reminds me that as teachers, we never know when and how our belief in a student will take hold, but it is so very important that we do believe that it will. In some ways that is a legacy that Nobe has passed on to me, and I am so pleased to establish this fund to honor his memory and his place in the Peru community."