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Pakachoag Music School marks a generation of making music

Pakachoag school marks 30 years

LIVING

By Richard Duckett TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

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"The job has changed so much," Sarah Smongeski observed. "I spend a lot of time on the computer screen."

In that regard she is like many of us. But one thing she also gets to do at work does rather set her apart. "I enjoy it when I can get my flute out and see the kids," she said. The activity is definitely job-related. In addition to being the executive director of Pakachoag Music School of Greater Worcester in Auburn (and various satellite locations), Smongeski teaches flute at the school. "I don't think I will ever want to stop doing that," she said.

She's been doing both jobs there for more than 20 years.

Meanwhile, Pakachoag Music School is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year, and on Saturday will have a "30th Anniversary Thank-You Celebration" from 2 to 5 p.m. at Tuckerman Hall in Worcester. The event will include a reception, student showcase, faculty performances and dessert and coffee. Free tickets to the gala have been given to students, their families, and friends of the school as a way of saying "thanks." (Most tickets are taken; to inquire about advance ticket reservations, call the school at (508) 791-8159.)

Needless to say, the school has undergone many changes over 30 years. But for all its growth, the place seems to have retained a reputation of still being small enough to give expert individual attention to its students as well as a friendly place to be.

Annecca Smith recalls being "dragged" to Pakachoag to attend recitals performed by her older sister. Then she started going to the school for lessons. For 11 years. First piano, and later she started playing organ. Now a sophomore at Smith College, she said she is studying organ there as a music minor with a major in comparative literature.

Marie Gurriere, 16, of Dudley, started taking clarinet lessons at Pakachoag Music School a year ago. Her mother, Christina Gurriere, said "The school is much more than we had hoped for. Very professional, very thorough. Maria's very happy. She loves her teacher. And everyone there is very welcoming, friendly ... And it's small so you don't get that lost feeling."

The directions to the music school in Auburn include proceeding down the driveway at 203 Pakachoag St., where Pakachoag Church is at the front and the school entrance at the back.

The school was founded as Pakachoag Community Music School in 1982 by the church as part of a vision to offer something tangible to the community at a time when public schools were cutting their music programs. In 1989, the school was incorporated as an independent, nonprofit organization. The church maintained generous grant support for several years, but eight years ago, the school, in a sign of strength, began making a contribution for the use of the space.

Pakachoag Music School of Greater Worcester "30th Anniversary Thank-You Celebration"

When: 2 to 5 p.m. Oct. 27 **Where:**

Tuckerman Hall, Salisbury and

Tuckerman streets, Worcester **How**

much: Call the school at (508) 791-8159 for advance complimentary ticket reservations and information.

The petite Smongeski, who lives in Shrewsbury (she is married with a son), is originally from England and has the accent to prove it. She came to this country when her parents immigrated here, started taking flute lessons at the age of 12, and has performed as a flute player with several regional orchestras and also as a member of The New England Flute Duo. In addition to her playing, she developed an interest in teaching and education administration, and earned a Certificate of Special Studies in Administration and Management from Harvard University's Extension Division.

When she came on board at Pakachoag Community School in 1991, the school had about 40 students. Last year, the school served more than 430 in various programs and locations. That figure represents a 25 percent increase from five years ago, Smongeski noted.

Private instruction is also up 25 percent over five years, "which was a huge surge to us." Good thing, because "Our financial aid program is at an all time high — it has close to doubled in the past five years," Smongeski said.

Another change, in 2009, was Pakachoag Community Music School changing its name to the Pakachoag Music School of Greater Worcester.

The music school draws students from more than 40 communities in a 25-mile radius, but not everyone realized its reach. "We were serving a lot of communities around and about Worcester, and people would say, 'Oh really?' And we needed to make that clear to people," Smongeski said of the name change.

Students range in age from birth through retirement — "There isn't any age range," Smongeski said. An expanding array of programs range from Music Together (early childhood) to musical theater. In 2011, the school announced a joint program with First Congregational Church of Shrewsbury offering music and other arts classes to children and adults in Shrewsbury. Other satellite locations for some programs include Sterling, Sturbridge and West Boylston. "Outreach Program Partners" in Worcester include Guild of St. Agnes Day Care & Pre-School, Notre Dame Long Care, Worcester Chapter of the American Guild of Organists and All Saints Church.

During a recent interview, Smongeski talked a lot about "value."

"I guess you could start by saying the value of what we do. It continues to be of value to people because they participate. We get a lot of support from the community."

As for the future of Pakachoag Music School, is there any danger that more change and growth could make it become too large or diversified — and devalued?

"It's more important to do what we do well," Smongeski replied. "Manage our growth in a way that continues to foster the good things that people recognize us for."

Pakachoag Music School alum Daniel Collins, now living in Los Angeles and working for a talent and literary agency, values the time he spent there.

"I had an amazing experience at Pakachoag," he said. "I took lessons there with a violinist named Peter Hughes throughout my high school years, and could not imagine studying with anyone else. He had a passion for music that was infectious, and showed me that music is more than practice and technique, but is something much more personal and profound ... Pakachoag remains a place in my memory where young people are encouraged to make music an important part of who they are and who they will become."

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