

# KUSD *Generations*

## Music Department

There comes a time when an experience positively impacts your life so much that it helps shape your future. For a majority of KUSD's music directors, the joys of playing music as a KUSD student has brought that impact full circle as they teach the district's next generations of young musicians with a meaningful and personal connection to the program.

KUSD orchestra director Lindsay Pytel began playing violin the summer after fourth grade in a KUSD Summer Orchestra beginning class that was held in Lance orchestra room. She continued to play violin in that room as a Lance Junior High student. Today, she teaches the Lance orchestra students in that same room every day.

"I truly have been where my students are, and there is something incredibly special about that," she said.

Pytel, in her 15th year with KUSD, now teaches grades 5-8 at Lance Middle School, Forest Park Elementary School, and Whittier Elementary School. She also taught at Prairie Lane Elementary School and Jeffery Elementary School, and

student-taught with Dr. Robert Wells at Tremper High School, Pleasant Prairie Elementary School, and Vernon Elementary School.

"I think it is pretty neat to see how many former KUSD music students chose to return to KUSD to teach in the programs that helped shape us into the people we are," she said. "Deciding to play the violin as a KUSD student has steered me on the life path that I'm on and has contributed so much to who I am."

KUSD's well-known and nationally acclaimed music programs gave Pytel fantastic teachers and mentors, lifelong friends, and skills to perform music at a high-level, she said. As the third-largest school district in the state, KUSD is allowed large departments of teachers for each music discipline and, in most cases, buildings have a single teacher for each music discipline.

"I was inspired by the KUSD music teachers as a student, and I am still inspired by them now that they are my colleagues," Pytel said. "We communicate regularly and are constant resources for each other. We are able to collaborate as departments and put on huge districtwide events, festivals, field trips, and performances that would not be possible in many other school districts."

While she understands most of her students may not pursue a career in music, Pytel hopes to instill in them a lifelong love and appreciation for music.

"I have high expectations for my students, and I enjoy seeing them rise to a challenge," she said. "I like to show them what they are capable of, and how much fun it is to see how their hard work pays off. I hope they look back and realize how much music prepared them for life in general. Performing in a music ensemble allows students to be part of something much larger than themselves.

Music promotes communication, dedication, flexibility, reliability, teamwork, and so many other skills that are important in any





career.”

Lance choir director and sixth grade general music teacher Rita Gentile feels “a connection and duty to continue the program and make sure it maintains the excellence that I experienced as a student,” she said. Gentile attended Grewenow Elementary School, Vernon, Lance, and Tremper, and sang in the Lance choirs, Tremper Chorale, Vocal Jazz Ensemble and Madrigal Singers, one of her favorite activities to be a part of and a “true gem” in the Kenosha community.

At the age of 6, Gentile took piano lessons, which cultivated her early interest in music. However, it wasn’t until her involvement in the KUSD choral program that she knew she would build a career in music.

“The KUSD music program not only instilled musical skills and fine arts appreciation, but gave me the confidence to do hard things and set my own goals,” she said. “The directors I had experience with were not only classroom teachers but gave their time to extracurricular opportunities, furthered their own education, and did that while still maintaining their families.”

These examples set for Gentile inspired her to become a proud teacher, wife, daughter, and mom of three KUSD students while still having the desire to pursue her doctoral dissertation as she now becomes a candidate for the Doctor of Musical Arts in Music Education degree through Boston University.

“I want to show students that a lifelong engagement with music can mean different things for different people,” Gentile said. “Not everyone has to be like me and make a career out of it to make being involved in KUSD music worth it. Some might forget how to solve a specific algebraic equation or the name of the treble clef notes as they get older, but they will always remember how it felt to join voices with others who had the same intention. There is not much that can unite us in our current world, but music remains one of those steadfast things that still has the power to.”

Mahone Middle School and Nash Elementary School orchestra director Liz Tercek attended Vernon, Lincoln, and Tremper as a student. She played the viola in Orchestra Festival in eighth grade and went on to play in the Tremper Chamber Orchestra. She has been teaching in KUSD for 23 years, and hopes the positive impact she received as a KUSD student is one she can make on her students as well as well as instilling a love for learning.

“Teaching something that I love has brought me so much joy,” Tercek said. “I hope my students also find a love for learning in general and especially learning music.”

Katie Toler, K-5 music teacher, played clarinet for Lance band as well as Tremper symphonic band, symphonic winds, wind ensemble, and Band of the Blackwatch. Her fondest memories of being a KUSD band student were the community and family feelings along with the high expectations of the program and overall performances.

“I was motivated to become a music teacher after my experiences in KUSD music as a musician and the teaching opportunities I had while in high school,” Toler said. “It created the desire in me to be a music educator. It also prepared me well for music performance at the collegiate level.”

After teaching in another district, Toler ultimately returned to her roots with KUSD, where she has now taught elementary music for seven years. The reason she’s stayed is due to the educational leadership and community of educators. She hopes to instill in her students

a lifelong love of music and music making, memorable experiences, and successful music-making opportunities.

Bullen Middle School and Somers Elementary School band director Katie Poole played trombone in wind ensemble, symphonic band, jazz band, and full orchestra during her time as a student at Washington Middle School and Bradford High School. Her fondest memories were of the quality of the ensembles she was a part of and the band trips she took in high school.

“It pushed me to be my best. Seeing the great musicians that have come through the program made me a better player,” Poole said.

“It is a great program that gave so much to me. I jumped at the chance to come back and teach here when a position opened up.”

In addition to her 14 years of teaching in KUSD, Poole also continues to play trombone and euphonium with the Kenosha Pops Band, Belle City Brassworks, and UW-Parkside Reunion Big Band and hopes her students find a similar lifelong passion for playing music.

“I want them to feel the same love of music that I felt when I was a student, and still feel today, and I want them to know even if they don’t go into this as a job, they can play their instrument and love music for life,” Poole said.

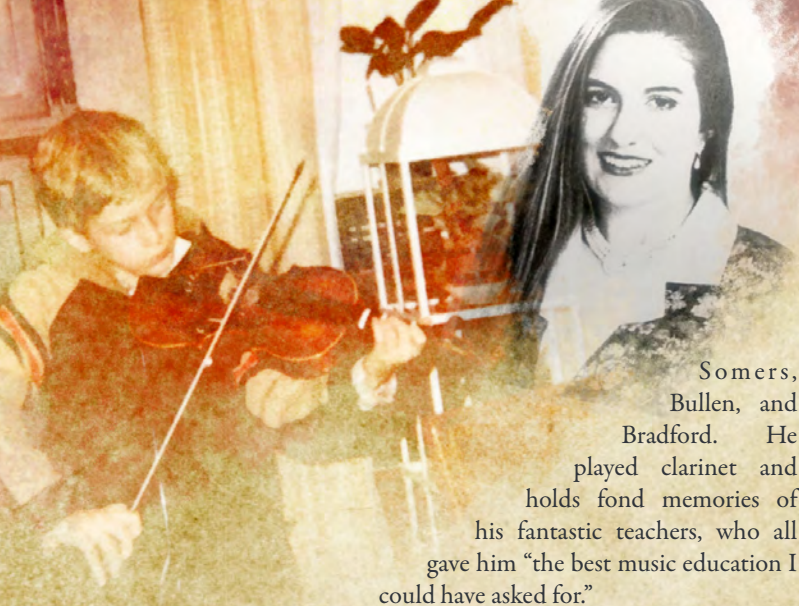
Nathan Larsen, band director at Lincoln Middle School, Brass Community School, and Southport Elementary School, began his first official year in KUSD in 2021. As a KUSD student, Larsen attended

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*Nathan Larsen  
KUSD band director*

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Somers, Bullen, and Bradford. He played clarinet and holds fond memories of his fantastic teachers, who all gave him "the best music education I could have asked for."

"I would not be a band director if it was not for KUSD's music program," Larsen said. "I want to make sure the students in KUSD have access to the same great music education that I received when I was here."

He recalls being a part of the 50th Band-O-Rama with guest conductor Brian Balmages, who will return as the guest conductor for Larsen's first Band-O-Rama as a KUSD director. Along with unique experiences like these, Larsen hopes to show his students the benefits music can have in their lives.

"Even if they don't go on to become band directors or performers, I still want them to know that music can always be a part of their life, and it will help to make their life more fulfilling," he said.

KTEC West K-5 general music teacher Lisa Dittlof credits her involvement in KUSD choir and musicals as the reason she showed up to school every day.

"The KUSD music program kept me in school. That was the place where I felt important, cared about, and special," she said.

Dittlof sang soprano in choir at Bullen under the direction of now-Tremper choir director Polly Amborn and in the top choir at Bradford under Kim Deal and Brad Mann. She also sang as a chorus member for a summer program under Holly Stanfield, in numerous musicals, and the alma mater at her 1995 high school graduation.

Along with these fond memories and experiences, Dittlof credits her main reasons for teaching in KUSD for 20 years to the "phenomenal program with very dedicated teachers."

"My music teachers always made me feel special and important. They also inspired me to become a music teacher," she said. "I hope that I am instilling the love of music in all of my students. I also hope that I am building their self-esteem so that they feel they can accomplish anything in life."

Heather Kamikawa attended Harvey Elementary School, Bullen, and Bradford as a KUSD student, and now teaches orchestra at Bradford, Wilson Elementary School, and McKinley Elementary School. She has been teaching in the district for 15 years. As a student, she participated in band, choir, and orchestra, playing viola and alto, as a member of the Blackwatch Colorguard, and with the Madrigal

Strings. Some of her fondest memories include playing in Carnegie Hall with the Bradford Chamber Orchestra and marching in Disney World with the Band of the Blackwatch.

"I had a place to belong and thrive in my music courses in KUSD," she said. "I want to give back positive energy and teaching and continue to grow the program that helped shape me as into the musician and person I am today. I want my students to know I believe in them and to help them see their progress and strengths both in and outside of the music classroom. Orchestra is a place they are always welcome and they know they belong."

Harborside Academy choir and drama teacher Kristen Singer found lifelong friendships and a passion for music as a KUSD student.

"My choir experience was top notch," she said. "I loved being able to participate in musicals with students from other schools who remain some of my best friends to this day."

Singer attended Roosevelt Elementary School, Lance, and Tremper, and sang soprano in the A Cappella Choir, Madrigals, and many musicals. While she always loved music, KUSD's music and theater programs are what prompted her to pursue the arts as a lifelong career, she said. She has been teaching in KUSD for more than a decade.

"I hope to encourage students to find their passion in the arts and to watch them flourish in areas they didn't realize were possible," Singer said. "I hope that they have memories of having fun with each other and making incredible music, and I hope that they support the arts as adults whether as an audience member or active participant."

Elementary orchestra director Lorikaye Kristiansen has taught in KUSD for 26 years. Today, she teaches at EBSOLA Creative Arts, Brass, Frank Elementary School and Curtis Strange Elementary School.

"I love our community, and I love what music does for young minds," she said. "Creative students grow into thoughtful adults. The lessons learned and confidence gained in the music classroom are life long and never forgotten."

As a KUSD student, Kristiansen attended Harvey, Washington, and Bradford and credits her general music teacher Noelle Sheer for "kindling the first spark in my love of music" and making music class "the best day of the week."

Kristiansen then played violin in middle and high school, where she cultivated lifelong friendships performing and traveling with friends.

"Orchestra was everything to me," she said. "I learned to strive, cooperate, communicate, and compromise, all while pursuing artistic excellence."

Two instrumental KUSD teachers in Kristiansen's life were Robert Wells and David Schripsema, who still hold a special place in her heart for fostering these skills. She hopes her students take away similar skills and impacts.

"I hope my students find joy, growth, compassion, acceptance, and pride through the study of their instrument and ensemble performing," Kristiansen said.

Keith Robinson, KTEC orchestra director for grades 5-8, has taught orchestra in KUSD for 17 years. As a KUSD student, he attended Forest Park and McKinley Junior High, which is now KTEC West, one of the two campuses where he teaches. Prior to teaching in KUSD, he taught orchestra in an Illinois school district until the

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*Lisa Dittlof  
KTEC West K-5  
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program was dissolved due to a failed referendum.

"KUSD has always had a strong instrumental music program both for band and orchestra. The community support is crucial," he said. As a young violist, he loved playing in Orchestra Festival, but most of all, appreciated what the KUSD program gave him.

"It instilled in me a love of orchestral music. It also taught me that it takes dedication and hard work to learn a skill, but it is so worth it," Robinson said. "I want to teach my students to love all kinds of music, to learn to discipline themselves, but to have fun in the process."

Brianna Santelli recently experienced a full circle moment when she watched a recruitment video for All City Choir, which she now is a director for in her second year working for KUSD.

"I realized I am going back to where it all began, elementary choir, but this time, I would be on the other side of it as a director," she said. "I will once again be a part of Choral Fest, but this time, I get to experience it as one of the leaders."

Santelli attended Somers, Bullen and Bradford, and participated in choir fourth grade through her senior year and all through college. She also was a Madrigal singer and sang in several theatrical productions.

"All of my memories participating in KUSD music and theater are positive ones and played a huge role in me pursuing a music degree," she said. "I made many lifelong friendships through my participation in the arts. My teachers—from elementary through high school—are the reason I learned to love music and acting. They taught me to follow my dreams and take risks, and, more importantly, gave me the tools to do so."

Santelli now teaches elementary music at Curtis Strange and is a director for All City Choir. Additionally, she is a director for the Children's Theatre Academy, which also serves many KUSD students at all grade levels in preparation for the high school KUSD Theatre Arts program.

KUSD band director Lucas Dickinson is in his 14th year as a KUSD teacher and is proud to be a part of the program he once played for. Dickinson attended Jeffery, Roosevelt, Lance, and Tremper, and played bassoon in band, trombone and piano in jazz band, and tuba in Rambler Band, Band of the Blackwatch, State Honors Band, and State Honors Orchestra. Today, he performs keyboard in various bands throughout the area and plays trombone in class when he needs to model something for his students.

"I play music with kids all day! How fun is that?," he said. "It is cool to continue the tradition of excellence that the KUSD music program is known for."

Dickinson teaches band at Washington and fifth-grade lessons at Grant, Harvey, and Jefferson elementary schools, and he hopes his students walk away with many benefits music education provides.

"I hope that students leave my class with a greater understanding, appreciation, and love for music of all genres, and I hope that students find a way to use music to enrich their own lives as they transition into adulthood," Dickinson said.

Brittany Teschler didn't participate in band until her junior year at Indian Trail High School, but the experience affirmed her calling to become a band director. Today, she teaches elementary band at both KTEC campuses and middle school band at KTEC East, and she has taught the summer Continental Band for almost all of her 11 years with KUSD.

"I want to give back to a program that helped bolster my love of music and I get to work with amazing teachers who have all been mentors to me since day one of band in high school," she said.

Teschler played clarinet as a KUSD student and was an alto in choir in college. While she hopes to instill in her students a passion and appreciation for music, she also hopes they benefit from the many other ways music can impact their lives.

"I hope that I'm able to foster a love of music. If not that, then I'm hoping to at least help students find a way to release emotions and express themselves in any way they feel comfortable," Teschler said.

KUSD Fine Arts administrative specialist Sami Bartmer is grateful for the impact KUSD's music program has had on her, and she loves being involved in them in a new way.

"I love being involved in the same programs that were so formative for me as a student," she said. "It is so neat to be on the other side of the events that I participated in years ago, and it feels like such an honor at times to be able to help maintain and further improve these programs."

Bartmer attended Curtis Strange, McKinley Middle School, and Bradford and participated in band, choir, and orchestra as a student playing string bass and singing alto in choir. She especially enjoyed her middle school band and orchestra groups, and found it very rewarding to return a couple of years after finishing middle school to participate in the McKinley farewell concert in 2012.

"As a student, music helped me to become more confident and gain skills that I've used and loved ever since," she said. "Participating in the music programs opened opportunities for my college experience, volunteering, and personal life. My husband and I met in middle school orchestra class, and several of my close friends to this day are from participating in music groups as well."

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