

Never Say Never

By Gene Fambrough

In today's job-seeking climate, it pays to have a wide variety of skills that can be applicable to many different situations. It is no longer advisable to go through school being a "one-trick pony" and hoping that you end up in your dream job. It is not impossible, mind you, just increasingly rare.

I recently completed a one-year position as Interim Director of Bands at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, my 16th year at the school. After some reflection, I realized there have been many opportunities along my path that I could have turned down because they did not align with my goals at the time, but because of my flexibility throughout the years I have been rewarded with a very fulfilling and varied career. I would like to share some specific examples that have happened along the way.

After the long-time Director of Bands at UAB accepted a different job in the spring of 2016, I was given the opportunity to serve as the Interim Director for the following school year. My initial reaction was to say no, but I soon realized that I had two choices: (1) adjust to the unknowns of a new position for a year (and the flood of emails), or (2) adjust to a new person in the interim role, then adjust to yet another person hired in the permanent position the following year. Looking at those two options, the better choice seemed obvious, so I accepted the offer. In hindsight, it was one of the best decisions of my career.

When I was first hired as a college teacher, the position was Assistant Director of Bands/Instructor of Percussion. At the time, I was much more interested in the second half of that description than the first; I had no desire to conduct concert bands or run marching band rehearsals; "Just let me stay in the trenches, please." Over the years, I was asked to conduct more and more, and as a result became more comfortable on the podium. This, coupled with my heavy involvement in both athletic bands, was a primary reason that I was considered to be a suitable replacement as the interim director.

Before I was hired at UAB, I spent three years at a medium-sized school, grades 6–12, in the public school system—two as an assistant band director and one as the director of bands. After my first two years as an assistant focusing on percussion, I was offered the opportunity to serve as director. At the time, I had some burnout working towards my doctorate, and I had done a bit of drill writing and music arranging, so I thought maybe this was a good chance to explore some other options. It was during this last year of teaching public school that I applied for my current position at UAB, and I certainly believe that my experience teaching middle and high school helped me land this position.

Backing up even further, as I was completing my master's degree, I had the naive idea that I would be able to land a college teaching job right away. I applied for a few openings, but did not get any second looks. When I saw a flier for a graduate teaching assistantship with a primary focus of teaching drumline, I put my name in the hat as a backup plan. Fortunately, I won that position, which allowed me to afford to live and work on my degree at the same time. Ironically, when I started my T.A. position for my master's, I was hopeful that I could take a break from marching percussion—not because I didn't like it, but because I had already served as the drumline instructor for two years as an undergraduate and had spent a summer on tour teaching drum corps. I was asked to teach the drumline during both years of my master's assistantship, which helped to earn my teaching position as a doctoral student.

In my undergraduate years, I was enthralled with every new aspect of percussion that I encountered. I was finally in a really good drumline (we participated in the PASIC '87 contest my freshman year, and placed third), I was starting to learn about four-mallet marimba and MIDI, and got my first taste of percussion ensemble and steel band—what a wonderful world! I had no desire to be a band director at that time, but that was where I discovered I wanted to teach percus-

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sion at the college level. I kept on my degree path in Music Education knowing that it was helpful, but it also required me to teach public school one day.

Looking back to my high school years, I enjoyed my time in band, but I really wanted to tour the world with "Van Fambrough" (my brother played bass guitar and, of course, we had our own rock band). As I hung around the band room at every available opportunity, I realized that I enjoyed helping other students and had a natural understanding of how to read music. This, along with the realization that a career in a rock band wasn't necessarily guaranteed, helped me decide to go to college for a more traditional route. Flashback even further to 8th grade when a neighborhood friend heard me practicing and convinced me to try marching band. Quite obviously, I was hooked.

Today, I am an Associate Editor for *Percussive Notes*, and in the early part of my career at UAB, I was an active participant in our state PAS chapter—attending and hosting meetings, helping plan the Day of Percussion, and serving as Vice President of the chapter for several years. When my first son was born, something had to give, and that something ended up being the monthly chapter meetings. In order to continue serving the chapter, I volunteered to put together a chapter newsletter. It was a good outlet and was well-received, so I was also asked to assemble the programs for the annual Day of Percussion. This experience helped me hone my editing skills in a way I never thought would be of interest to me. By the time the *Percussive Notes* editor position was advertised, I already had a few articles published. Those, coupled with the newsletters and programs, would complete my application packet. If "high school me" would have been told of my future editing position, there is no telling what reaction I would have had.

Bringing things full circle (in a way I could never have imagined), my first ambitions of drumming in a rock band have also been satisfied. I teach at a wonderful university that not only allowed me to put together a progressive rock band for a faculty recital, but also supported me with praise in a formal review and renewed enthusiasm for starting an official rock/commercial music ensemble.

Many opportunities will cross your path, so take as many as you can. Had I known I would serve as a Director of Bands at a major university, I certainly would have taken more than one conducting course in my college curriculum. Fortunately, I was in a position of "on-the-job training" for many years before being counted on for some of those very same skills. In closing, get as much experience as you can, and never say never!

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