

Jazz teacher applauded on national stage

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As a teacher, it's one thing to be lauded by one's students, co-workers or community. It's another to be recognized at the provincial level. And for Westwood Collegiate's band instructor, Greg Edwards, it's a gobsmacking honour to earn the title of the nation's top jazz director.

Edwards has been named this year's winner of the Tommy Banks/NAC Orchestra outstanding jazz director award, presented annually by MusicFest Canada - The Nationals festival, in partnership with the National Art Centre.

"I wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for some pretty amazing people in my life," Edwards said.

A man by the name of Dave Brunelle comes to mind when Edwards thinks of those who supported and inspired him along the way. Brunelle was Edwards' high school band director in Penticton, B.C.

Edwards often moved as a child and youth (he comes from a family of miners). He was transplanted from northern B.C. to the Okanagan Valley during his Grade 12 year, and, having found himself in a new school on the cusp of graduation, Edwards struggled to secure a class schedule that would allow him to play trumpet in the jazz band.

Like many schools, to get into a jazz band, one must first enrol in concert band. Given the school year was nearing its end, many classes — including concert band — were full. Edwards' principal said the only way to get into the jazz band was to convince the teacher to make an exception.

"He said yes ... He made me fall in love with jazz music. I really fell in love after that," Edwards said. "We went to a couple of music festivals and ended up winning a scholarship to Idaho State University. It just sort of got me going."

Edwards credits Brunelle's choice to include him in the program as the precise moment that kickstarted his decades-long career in music.

"It's the difference one decision can make in someone's life," Edwards said.

With the title of Tommy Banks/NAC Orchestra outstanding jazz director award beside his name, Edwards can't help but chuckle at the fact that he and his mother are both familiar with Tommy Banks, but for two different reasons.

Edwards recalls that his mother watched The Tommy Banks Show, a variety program that aired on CBC Television



Photo by Katlyn Streilein

Westwood Collegiate's music instructor, Greg Edwards, recently won this year's Tommy Banks/NAC Orchestra Outstanding Jazz Director Award. Edwards is pictured here with Grade 10 to 12 students in concert band and symphonic band in the school's music room on May 27.

in the early 1970s, when the family lived in his hometown of Lynn Lake, Man. So, when Edwards recently told her about the award, she immediately made the connection.

"I was like, 'Oh my gosh, he had this huge TV show. I didn't even know that,'" Edwards said. "It was really neat to do some research and learn about this wonderful man who gave his life to music ... and his strong beliefs in music education," Edwards said.

Though Edwards is new to parts of Banks' repertoire, his history with MusicFest Nationals spans decades. Edwards has been attending the festival since he was an up-and-coming musician in 1988.

"Under Greg's exemplary leadership over the past 22 years, Westwood's music program has set the highest standard of performance and has participated in four European tours, including headlining at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland," said Neil Yorke-Slader, the associate director and

instrumental jazz chairman for MusicFest Canada, in a news release.

Edwards invites the public to attend the Westwood Collegiate's final performance of the year on Wed., June 8 at 6:30 p.m. inside the school gym. The concert will feature the Grade 9 concert band, the Grade 10 concert band, the symphonic band and two jazz ensembles: the Rouge Road Renegades and Warrior Jazz. Admission is free and doors open at 4:00 p.m.

For more information about Westwood Collegiate's band program and upcoming concerts, follow @bandatwestwood on Instagram.