

Influential Teacher Interview

Ruth Claessens has been teaching secondary music and English for the past twenty-six years. She knew right from grade nine in 1979 that she wanted to become a teacher. Coming from a musical family helped to ignite the music teacher within her.

"Hardys just sing, and I thought right away to become a music teacher. I even remember my first high school song, the spiritual 'Let us sing'."

Throughout high school, Ken Fleet and was one of her main inspirations to pursue this career. Ruth's University voice instructor, Roma Riddell, and her choral conductor and Faculty of Music Singers Director, Professor Deral Johnson, were focal inspirations while attending the University of Western Ontario. Yet, it was also everyone else she had encountered that proved to be great models, including her private vocal teacher in grade 13, Brenda Zadorsky.

Even after twenty-six years of teaching, Ruth said she is still having as much fun as ever! She has never imagined doing anything else in her life, or "cutting up" the system. Nothing else has ever really appealed to her that has given her the same satisfaction that teaching music has.

"There's a little part of me that can't imagine doing something else with my life."

She also mentioned that even with all of the challenges, she still loves it.

"It is truly a pleasure everyday. I get to go to a job where I make music everyday!"

Yet, inevitably there are challenges. Each year, she feels as though she must recreate her job. Students change each year, and with that so does the way she must teach. Currently, arts is not a big requirement for graduation and that makes it a competition between arts and maths and sciences. On top of all of that, funding for the arts program in general is scarce. The funding that is provided is then split between visual arts, drama and music. That has definitely been a major barrier to providing the music program the students deserve.

"We have created all of these options for when we had a lot of kids, but now there is a decline. It's hard to make the numbers work in order to run music classes."

However, Ruth still feels it is important to give young people the opportunity for music, which is why she still enjoys going to her job each day. She stated that the best part of her job is getting to work with young people. She always gets an incredible energy from them, and that reassures the feeling of making some sort of difference in even just one life. Yet, she has never have associated her paycheck with her job.

"I have never thought about my job being what I do to get paid. I know there is money in the bank, and that's enough for me."

In the past few years, Ruth has noticed that more kids have part time jobs than when she first started. That makes it harder for students to engage in music programs, just in terms of practicing. Another barrier in the music program has been technology. Cellphones are often more of a distraction than a helpful resources. She has found that during band and choir practices and even class time, students are browsing on their phones rather than doing the task at hand. In addition, although Ruth acknowledges the many benefits from technology, she has also realized how never ending it can become.

“All of these new resources, everything that is out there, can be overwhelming and cause a barrier. We are a whole lot more accessible, but then there is an expectation that you will be available to use all of these resources all of the time. We are expected to be on 24/7 in a way.”

Ruth has also noticed that many kids just want to “make music”, and see music theory and history unuseful. The dynamics differ in every class, so she tries to take the children from where they are and build up from there. She also stated that there are many different ways to succeed in music and it varies from student to student. In the classroom today, much of the curriculum is performance based making it vital to choose repertoire that suits the talents and interests of the students, but also challenges them. Listening exercises have also proved to be a huge part of the learning process. This way, Ruth feels like they can talk about the creative process behind a piece

“I model a lot of what is expected, especially in voice. Most of it is schere imitation, as well as building on practical music skills like sight singing or sight reading”

In addition to classroom learning, Ruth suggested that it is important to go to music festival as it reinforces learning and creates a challenge to take the students to the next level. This also provides an opportunity to work with a clinician. For herself personally, she reads professional journals to keep up with the new ideas and research being done. She is involved with OMEA, as she finds it a great resource to stay connected with fellow music educators who are a great resource within themselves.

“These music supplies are great to help you go through a variety repertoire that is definitely useful and that you can bring back into the classroom and share.”

Even online resources have been helpful. She has found many free apps to use, including a tuning app to tune the band and an online metronome to keep in time with. In regards to keeping track of marks, Kahootz has been a very handy resources for herself.

Over twenty-six years, Ruth stated that education is changing, but that it has always been changing. From curriculum to technology, things have been changing. Teachers are becoming more like facilitators, meaning they are not always the traditional dictating “teacher” figure. She feels this allows for a more personal connected with her students. Contrary to that, she feels like education has become very prescribed.

“How we are supposed to write your report cards is very prescribed to us? It makes our comments less valuable.”

At the same time, she feels the curriculum is open. This is partially due to the fact that every high school’s classroom dynamics and levels of performance are going to differ. Yet, each child is expected to attain a certain level of competency.

“It isn’t apples to apples. Some things in music are even fading out. There are just newer, different ways to do things now.”

There are so many more and different extracurriculars or hobbies for kids to do now which means they have to pick and choose. Ruth has seen this as a common change.

“We over program our children so they think they’ve already been there done that and don’t need to continue pursuing it. That can be a negative. Kids still do really like to feel accomplished, and that is something music offers. There is a sense of working together that creates a positive space for students. I also think kids find it easier to be themselves in the classroom too, and this goes along with the switch in societal norms. A great positive.”

This being said, there are many things Ruth would like to see changed in the education system. She would like to bring back Music as a department in itself instead of all of the arts being grouped together. In addition to that, having more equality in budgeting would help to build the music program to its fullest potential.

“Our high school was once the only high school in the board to not have an instrumental program for many years. I just want to feel valued, for myself and for the students.”

There also needs to be more transparency, she stated. It would make it much easier to know what’s going on if there were no “behind closed doors” deals. If she could have more acknowledgement for the extracurriculars she runs, that would help to instill the idea that she is valued in the education system. Also, having a later start time may actually benefit students more than an early start. This would make it so much more accessible to children, especially in rural communities.

Outside of being the “tradition teacher”, Ruth feels like teachers need to be a good role model to their students. She also feels it is important to show interest in all of your students and in the commitments outside of their academic lives. She wants to feel like she knows her students.

“It is so much more than your subject, your courses. We have a big role as mentors and counselors and just being a regular, reliable adult in some of these kids’ lives.”

That being said, Ruth wants to encourage future educators to get into because you love it and because you love people. She also wants to emphasize the point of having expertise and mastery in your field, whatever it may be. Teaching has become a competitive profession, so take your additional qualification courses to make yourself as qualified as possible. She knows it is important to look good on paper, but you should always have some other things to fall back on. Another important aspect she mentioned was staying healthy.

"It's a really hard job to do when you get sick or your energy is low. In your youth your enthusiasm carries you but as you get older your expertise carries you."

Lastly, she mentioned how it's not all about being the best teacher you can be, but also keep a portion of your music personal. You need to keep fueling your musical passion. In addition, you need to have a team player mindset, because she knows how important supporting your colleagues is.

"Keep performing and keep part of it for you. It's not all about the job and it keeps you recharged. Be kind, not critical, to each other. It's not a competition."

Overall, Ruth has loved every moment of her job, even the difficult ones. She has embraced every step of her music education journey, and encourages aspiring music educators to do the same.