

Del Norte grad donates 100 band instruments – and then some

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Del Norte High School alum Nick Rail, working through the Wild Rivers Community Foundation, has donated more than \$70,000 for local student band instruments.

Rail and his wife, Lisa, are funding the acquisition of 100 new band instruments, according to a foundation press release.

“Many of the current instruments barely work,” said Rail, a 1968 graduate of the high school. “Some are over half a century old. That isn’t right.

“This is an opportunity to strengthen the existing music program and give students the tools they need to succeed.”

Those tools include five trombones, 12 saxophones, 16 flutes, 14 clarinets, 12 baritone horns, and a variety of drums and related equipment.

According to the foundation, the new instruments will be unveiled at 5 p.m. Friday during a special “Ta Da!” event at Mary Peacock Elementary School, 1720 Arlington Dr. in Crescent City.

The one-hour event, hosted by KCRE Radio’s Rene Shanle-Hutzell, will feature student and teacher testimonies, as well as performances by the Del Norte High School marching band and the Tsunami Swing Band. Refreshments will be served.

Reservations are encouraged online at bit.ly/TADA2020, or by calling 707-465-1238.

“The purpose of the ‘Ta Da!’ celebration is to get people excited about changing children's lives via music,” Rail said. “I hope others will notice what we’re doing and want to be a part of it.”

Longtime Del Norte High School music teacher Dan Sedgwick purchased his first band instrument as a teen from Rail’s music store in Santa Barbara.

Sedgwick said, “This is an awesome gift. The quality of the new instruments is way higher than most of our inventory, but the quantity is the impressive part. This is something that would take 20 years for my booster club to fundraise for.”

Wild Rivers Community Foundation Director Gina Zottola said, “We are so happy to support Nick and Lisa with their philanthropic dream. We hope this gift will create an upswell of support for cultural involvement and enrichment throughout Del Norte County.”

Long before Rail became the owner of a chain of music stores in southern California, he lived with his parents and brother in Crescent City. He said that as a fourth-grader at Redwood Elementary School, he was struggling to find his creative niche when the school offered a band class for the first time.

During a school assembly, someone demonstrated the various band instruments that students could play. “Music! That’s what I wanted to do,” Rail recalled.

“Of course, joining the band meant buying an instrument. My parents didn’t have a lot of money, but I made ‘the pitch’ to them anyway. To my surprise, they said yes.”

His instrument of choice was a cornet. “It was an incredibly empowering and magical moment for this 9-year-old. I was the kid with the iron-on patches on his jeans, and to this day I have no idea how my folks could afford it.”

Rail continued to perform in music groups through high school and college, and ultimately established a career in music retail, specializing in the sale and repair of band instruments.

He and wife Lisa followed what was happening in Del Norte County from southern California and often donated individual instruments to schools here, while repairing others at little or no cost.

“For years, Nick and Lisa have been coming up to Crescent City every Fourth of July, and Nick has marched with our community marching band in the parade,” said Christie Lynn Rust, a former Del Norte music teacher and director of the local Pacific Music Guild.

“As we practiced the night before the parade and the day of, you could find Nick repairing a missing pad on a clarinet, realigning a trombone slide, oiling instruments or perhaps pulling a stuck mouthpiece.

“Through it all, you could hear his calm, supportive, encouraging voice ... helping others.”

Rail said that when he learned from Sedgwick about the challenges facing today’s music students, he and his wife knew “it was time for me to give back, to provide children in Del Norte County the same opportunities I had when I was growing up.”

Rail contacted the Wild Rivers Community Foundation to establish the Nick and Lisa Rail Music Fund, to improve the scope and quality of band instruments for all local elementary, junior and high school music programs.

In addition to their initial \$70,000 (which was used to purchase instruments with a retail value of nearly twice that amount), he wanted to do something more to guarantee that the instruments stayed in good working condition.

In 2019, Rail bought a repair shop from a retiring music store owner in southern California. He and Sedgwick loaded tools and supplies in a 40-foot trailer and drove to Del Norte High School, where they set up a special repair shop in the band room.

“This is an amazing opportunity for Del Norte High School, because I hope to soon have a class on instrument repair for students to take,” Sedgwick said.