

# Beloved Kirkwood Band Director To Retire

District music educator Rebecca Friesen leaving after 20 years of service

by Melissa Wilkinson

Despite frequently standing center stage as conductor, Rebecca Friesen prefers to stay out of the spotlight. Now poised to retire after nearly 20 years in the Kirkwood School District, the music educator knows it's not about the individual, but what can be accomplished together.

Friesen began her career in the Washington School District followed by the Fort Zumwalt School District. After her daughter was born, Friesen spent time as an adjunct faculty member at St. Louis Community College-Meramec before being hired as head band director at North Kirkwood Middle School in 2005. She took over as the district's director of bands in 2018.

As band director for the whole district, Friesen's roles are many, from pairing young students with the best instruments to conducting the high school's three concert bands. In between performances, she teaches the beginning clarinet class — her specialty — and instructs middle and high school band students. She also teaches special groups like the Woodwind Chamber Ensemble, and accompanies students on school trips.

While teaching music is a major part of the job, Friesen acknowledges there's a lot more to learn in a band classroom.

"Music education is not just learning how to play an instrument. The skills learned through collaborating with each other, being part of something bigger than yourself, understanding that it makes a big difference when you're not there — that makes a huge impression on their growth and maturity," she said. "They go through leadership training in band camp and learn to lead their sections. They learn how to run a rehearsal and make sure everyone is there on time. It's amazing."

Nathan Hopkins, a student at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and a student teacher at Pattonville High School, is one of Friesen's former students. He attributes some of his ambition for becoming a teacher to his time in the Kirkwood band program.

"My experience in band contributed to a lot of the leadership I can add to my resume," he said, noting that he was a drum major for the marching band in high school. "Rebecca Friesen's drive and passion for music itself kept me in the program. She'd always push us to play more difficult songs and pick out enjoyable selections. She had faith in me that I could accomplish a lot of different things."

While Hopkins isn't studying music, he is continuing with the tuba in UMSL's wind ensemble. Friesen said she cherishes those kinds of stories.

"There's so many kids who started off in band but maybe didn't take to it right away, and then they matured and loved it. Later, they thanked me for keeping them in band and making sure they stayed," she said. "That's always really special, especially when you have a kid who graduates and comes back to tell you that even though they're not a music major in college, they decided to keep playing."

"It's nice to hear that it stayed in their lives because it was that important to them," she added.



Kirkwood School District's Director of Bands Rebecca Friesen was honored at an April 30 concert held at the Keating Center for the Performing Arts at Kirkwood High School. | photos by Ursula Ruhl



Music educator, conductor and band director Rebecca Friesen speaks at an April 30 concert held in her honor.

## Band Family

Hopkins' final year in the Kirkwood band program was during the COVID-19 pandemic. Friesen said it was a terrible time for all.

"Can you imagine trying to teach instruments on Zoom? You can't play together because it doesn't line up," she said. "Even when we came back in person we were scared because nobody knew what blowing through an instrument would do."

One of Friesen's most vivid memories is returning to class in the school theater — the only room large enough to hold the entire band — with students seated every three or four seats to maintain social distancing.

"We lost a lot of students because it was no fun, but the students who stayed were all in. Especially our seniors, who were freshmen when that happened — they're all so tight with each other," said Friesen. "That's the special thing that came out of it. We all experienced this really strange thing together and got through it. It was terrible, but we made it. We're back and we have normal numbers in the program now."

The camaraderie developed in band, said Friesen, is one of the main reasons why students stick around for so long.

"They talk about how important it was to have a group of people who support and care for them. Everyday they get to be with their friends and make something together. They meet people they wouldn't have met normally," said Friesen. "We call it a band family."

Sometimes the term "family" can be interpreted literally. Throughout her 19 years with the district, Friesen has instructed many sets of siblings and become close with numerous families. Elizabeth and Ed Plants, for example, have had six kids go through the Kirkwood band program, with the youngest graduating two years ago.

During those years, Friesen became an important fixture in their lives. Youngest son Christopher Plants even dressed as Friesen for Halloween his freshman year.

"There have been a lot of very top-notch musicians that have come through Kirkwood band," said Ed Plants. "Our kids were never going to make a career out of it, but they had a place and Rebecca was an important part of that."

Elizabeth Plants, who served as co-president of the Kirkwood Band Boosters, worked closely with Friesen and other band directors over the years. When her oldest daughter, Michelle, didn't want to participate in marching band, Friesen encouraged her to try, and she fell in love with it.

From then on, said Elizabeth Plants, it was never a question of whether the rest of the Plants siblings would participate in band — the only question was which instrument each would play.

"You could sense Rebecca's passion for the music, but even more so, her passion for the kids," said Elizabeth Plants. "She challenged them musically, but she was interested in their whole development as a student academically, emotionally, how were they hoping with everything high school has to throw at them. We have no doubt the tradition will continue under the new director because of the legacy she's left."

## "A Very Special Community"

Assistant Band Director Matthew Banks will take over for Friesen for the 2024-25 school year. In preparing for her final days, Friesen fondly thinks back over her time with the district.

One of her proudest memories was a Woodwind Chamber Ensemble performance in which the group performed a composition by a former student — "The Hymn of Axiom" by Kyle Rieger. Rieger rehearsed with the group virtually and conducted the concert in person.

Friesen also cherishes her memories of each and every student performance. Last year, she achieved a career-long goal when a piece she commissioned from Gary Gackstatter was picked up by a publisher. It was her students' performance used for the recording.

"Some of my favorite days of the school year are the solo and ensemble festivals," she said. "These days are special because we teachers get to see the culmination of our students' hard work in their performances."

But the most influential part of being band director, she said, is the connections she's made over the years.

"It's the little things like getting a text from a former student on holidays wishing me and my family well, or running into alumni and former band parents and learning about what they are doing now," she said.

In her retirement, Friesen aims to play in Gackstatter's community band. She'd also like to garden, travel with husband Scott, and spend more time with her family. Her son, Andrew Friesen, followed in his mother's footsteps and is a band director as well. Her daughter, Audrey Friesen, is also pursuing the arts with a creative writing program in Bath, England.

While she'll miss serving the Kirkwood School District, Friesen knows she's leaving the band in good hands.

"The staff I had the pleasure of working with are incredible teachers. They're the best of the best. It's a very, very special community of people and kids," she said. "I know they'll keep that part alive. It was here before I got here, and it'll be here after I leave."