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Building for the Long Term: Chesebro keeps the music playing

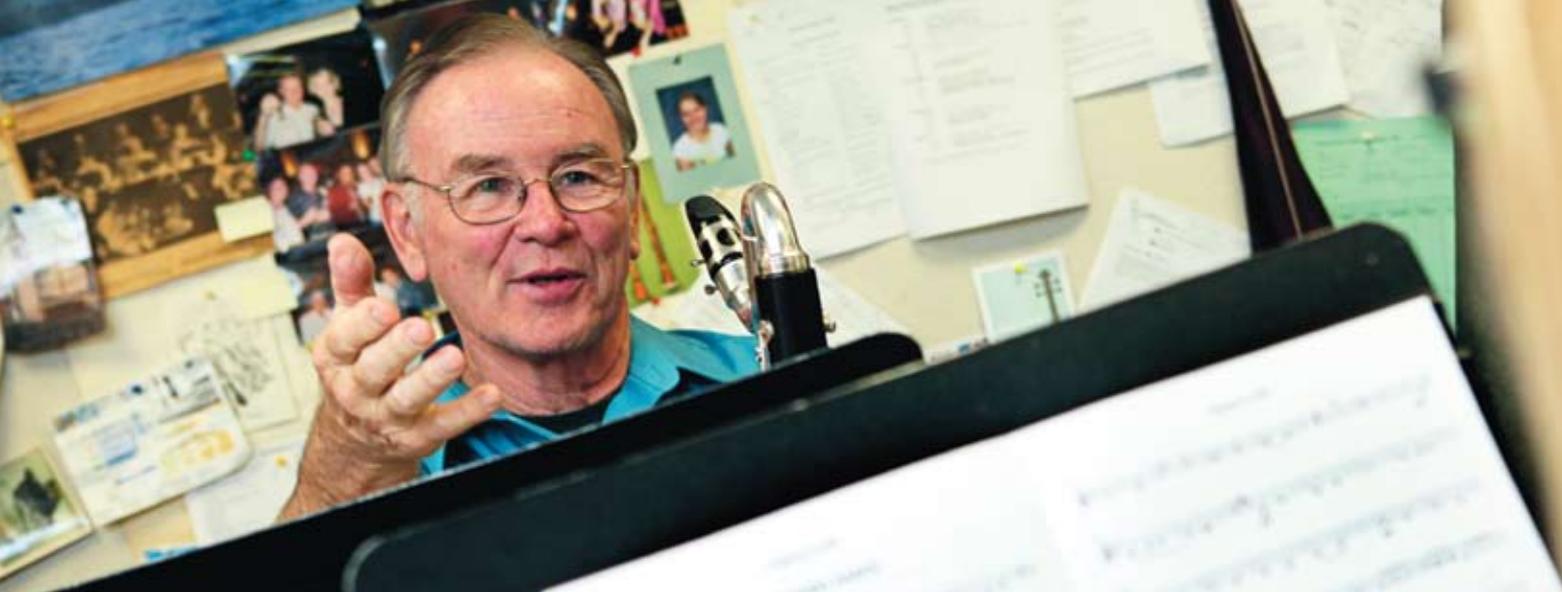
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JEREMY FLEMING (2)

Chesebro keeps the music playing

ROBERT CHESEBRO says he became seriously interested in music during his teen-age years in Stevens Point, Wis., in the early 1950s.

So what did the young man do to pursue and develop his interest? He joined a polka band — “There was a lot of Polish and German influence in the area,” he says — playing clarinet, saxophone and even trumpet alongside his older brother and assorted other musicians on concertina (accordion), drum and bass.

In hindsight, Chesebro says the experience was excellent preparation for his career as a professor of music. He’s now in his 44th year at Furman.

“Polka music can be difficult. You really have to practice to perform it well,” he says. “It helped me play better technically, and playing in the band taught me to learn music quickly.” It also paid handsomely: “Two dollars per hour was good money back then.”

Good enough that it helped pay his undergraduate tuition at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He would go on to earn his advanced degrees at the University of Indiana — and to join the Furman faculty in 1965. He’s taught woodwinds and conducting here ever since. Among his former students: Keith Lockhart ’81, conductor of the Boston Pops.

In looking back over his time at Furman, Chesebro recalls that he had only two woodwinds students his first year. The next year the number grew to 13, and the following year to 26. He credits his longtime colleague, former band director Dan Ellis, with helping him recruit: “We would go on band trips, and Dan knew everyone and would introduce me all around.”

In addition to his teaching duties, Chesebro has also been a soloist with symphonies throughout the Southeast and was a member of the Greenville Symphony for 42 years, serving as its principal oboist and clarinetist. From 1972 to 1997 he conducted the Carolina Youth Symphony, composed of the finest young musicians in the area.



“It was a big job,” Chesebro says of his years with CYS, “and it was a great way to get to know and recruit good music students from the area.”

In 1993 he was appointed the Charles Ezra Daniel Professor of Music at Furman, a position endowed by the estate of Homozel Mickel Daniel, a patron of the arts and namesake of the Furman music building. The Daniel Chair, Chesebro says, has provided discretionary funds that have allowed him to travel, purchase music for the student quartets he conducts, and acquire software and books to support his teaching.

Moreover, it gave him the means to buy a treasured bass clarinet in 2005. He had been looking for just the right instrument for some time, and he wound up traveling to South Bend, Ind., to find the perfect fit. He has been able to use the instrument exclusively for the last few years. It will belong to the university after he retires.

And when will that be? Chesebro admits he’s starting to wind down, but he still enjoys working with students. He stays in shape through frequent visits to the Lay Physical Activities Center, and he does regular exercises for his fingers, tongue, lungs, and mouth and facial muscles.

Chesebro recently co-authored (with Tod Kerstetter ’85) *The Everyday Virtuoso*, a book that describes best practice methods for young clarinetists. He continues to perform on occasion with the Greenville Symphony and in orchestras for touring Broadway shows at the Peace Center for the Performing Arts. And he is choir director at Lutheran Church of Our Savior.

He also arranges for his student quartets to perform at local churches and other community events — to give them the same kinds of opportunities he had during his formative years in Wisconsin.

“It’s a great experience for them to be able to perform in public,” he says before adding drily, “although you don’t find that many students nowadays who play polkas.”

— JIM STEWART