

Colbert Hackler's Kids



Hackler's hands have gently guided music students for more than 60 years.

The professor could retire from OU, but he couldn't retire from teaching, much to the benefit of dozens of fledgling violinists.

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

PHOTOS BY ROBERT TAYLOR

Colbert Hackler's fingers may not be as strong or as agile as they once were, but if busy hands are happy hands, then his are certainly smiling. For more than 60 years they have conducted bands, patted backs, steered school buses, rifled through sheet music and danced their way along the graceful neck of a violin.

At 88, the University of Oklahoma professor emeritus of music education has put down the baton, but continues to teach out of his home, with 40 string students ranging in ages from 5 to 71. During his life as a public schools band director, orchestra leader and choral conductor, he has taught thousands not just to make notes, but also to make music, a distinction of which he is justifiably proud.

"My purpose is not to develop a Carnegie Hall player, but someone who enjoys making music," Hackler says. "I've had a lot of students over the years and only one has become a professional musician—only one out of thousands. That's a losing game. But if I can teach them to play for the pleasure of it, they will have something to enjoy their whole life long."

He is a living example of his doctrine. Hackler received his first violin as a Christmas present when he was only eight. "It was real shiny and pretty, but I didn't know what to do with it," he recalls. No one else in the tiny Oklahoma town of Ravia had an idea either, so his parents sent him to a local piano teacher. She would play a note on the piano, and the boy would find it on his violin.

A popular western swing band probably influenced him more than those early lessons. The young Hackler would listen at noon each day for Bob Wills and the Light Crust Dough Boys to make their way across the Red River and into his living room on waves of sound. With one ear to the radio and the other to his fiddle,

he would play along with Wills, finding the notes with his heart as much as his fingers. When the family moved to Ringling, Oklahoma, Hackler's father took him to a bona fide violin teacher in nearby Ardmore. By the time he entered Oklahoma City University, he knew that music would guide his life.

After graduation in 1943, Hackler accepted a job with Elk City public schools. "They needed somebody in vocal and instrumental music," he says, "and I could do both."

For the next 17 years, he defined music education in Elk City. He developed a music program at the schools, conducted the bands and choirs and even drove the bus to football games. On Sundays, he directed the choir at the Methodist church, accompanied on the organ by his beloved wife, Mary Jean. His influence on the town as a whole was so profound that in 1952, city leaders proclaimed a "Colbert Hackler Day" and twice residents presented him with a new car purchased with money from their own pockets.

"When I left Elk City, they had a high school band, a junior high band, a grade school band, a beginner's band, a high school mixed chorus, two glee clubs and a junior high mixed chorus. I

enjoyed it all," says Hackler. "I do indeed like teaching." When he returned to Elk City as a guest conductor in the late '80s, more than 700 former students showed up to pay their respects.

One of those students, OU Regent and Elk City publisher Larry Wade, says Hackler taught the community to love music. "He showed us that music was a positive expression of life," says Wade, who was named an All-State baritone horn in high school and later played with the Pride of Oklahoma Marching Band. Wade and his wife established the Dr. Colbert Hackler Scholar-



Colbert Hackler enjoys playing as much now as he did 80 years ago when he got his first violin as a Christmas present.

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ship for the Pride of Oklahoma to honor, as Wade says, a strong and compassionate man “who taught generations without ever raising his voice.”

In 1960, the Hacklers moved to Norman, where Colbert began teaching music education at OU and working on his doctorate, which he earned in 1968. When Mary Jean was diagnosed with cancer in 1981, Hackler retired to be with her. She died the following year.

“I retired,” he says, “but I couldn’t stick with it.” He became interested in the Suzuki method of teaching and started taking on a violin student or two. The philosophy of the Japanese method harkened back to his early days on the violin.

“Tradition teaches you to read notes first and then find them on the string,” he explains. “Suzuki teaches you to play first and shows you what the notes look like later. If you can play by ear, you play better in tune because you have to listen. I like to see the look on the kids’ faces when they play that first tune, to hear those first sounds of their own making.”

Every spring, Hackler organizes a recital for his young violinists. In its 20th year, children of former students now perform in the annual event. During a recent rehearsal, the maestro tries to arrange the group so all parents have a clear view of their child. After several attempts, he turns to the audience and laughs in resignation. They are *all* short. But once they begin to play, their music fills the room, and one cannot help but realize that every small finger on the string, every stroke of the bow



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Haleigh Lao watches as Hackler gives her violin a final tuning before the spring recital. The octogenarian personally tunes all 40 student violins to make sure “his kids” will sound their best for family and friends.



Once a week, Hackler and his ensemble of violinists visit retirement homes in the Norman area, playing a medley of familiar favorites for appreciative audiences.



Students work hard all year in preparation for the annual recital. For many the spring ritual marks the first time to perform onstage. Hackler finds room on the program for each student, no matter what their skill level. "I live for this," he says.



Retired Air Force Major General Jerry Holmes is Hackler's self-proclaimed "oldest and most difficult" student. The two enjoy each other's company even though Hackler admits he is "as tough as an old drill sergeant" when it comes to getting Holmes to practice.

is the product of one man's hand. Like the Johnny Appleseed of musicians, Hackler plants the seeds and lets someone else enjoy the fruit.

"Usually, I just get 'em started," he says. "I don't fine tune 'em. My purpose is to try to prepare them so when they go on to another teacher, they have a good sound and good technique. That is my desire. And along the way, I like for them to make good music."

Although the majority of Hackler's students have not

reached middle school, once in a while the instructor will take on a beginning adult. At 71, retired Air Force Major General Jerry D. Holmes is Hackler's self-proclaimed "oldest and most difficult student." Like his younger counterparts, the former NATO commander and fighter pilot, dutifully learned "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" before moving on to more challenging pieces. He says his goal is to play for the rest of his life, and possibly into the next.

"Colbert and I both have more runway behind us than ahead of us," says Holmes, who teaches as an adjunct professor in the OU College of Engineering, "and we have become very good friends. He is so selfless. His number one mission is to teach students, to add joy to their lives through music."

Once a week, Hackler and fellow musicians visit retirement homes in the Norman area. From six to 16 violinists show up, along with retired OU voice professor Russell Mathis, who adds a "real tasty piano."

"We're called the 9:30 String Ensemble because we rehearse at 9:30 and play at 10," Hackler quips. "I'm a teacher, so part of my job is to keep getting harder music for them to play." The group, which includes his daughter, Mary Anne Tullius, generally packs the house.

In front of his ensemble, Hackler wields his bow like a conductor's baton, guiding both musicians and audience down the lane of familiar favorites. "Who remembers that one?" he will call out after a

number. Hands shoot up around the room. "That's right," he says. "Pennies from Heaven.' Now try this one."

Although he is older than many of the residents he visits, Hackler shows little sign of giving up either his home or his students. "It's his life," says daughter Sally Rice. "The music keeps him going."

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