



## MENTOR'S DESK

### MNSOTA Mentoring Success

by Katie Koenning

I began teaching 5–12<sup>th</sup> grade orchestra in Fairmont, Minnesota during the 2018–2019 school year. Fairmont is a town of about 10,700 people with 180 students in the orchestra program. I was fortunate enough to walk into a job with a wonderful predecessor, supportive administration, a kind community and fantastic students. My music colleagues couldn't have been more welcoming and supportive. I felt warmly embraced in so many ways, but just a little isolated. Being the only orchestra teacher in the district, I quickly realized I needed more guidance on priorities and refining the curriculum going into my second year of teaching. I had many projects in mind, but was unsure which one to pick up first. That is where my mentor came in.

When I saw the MNSOTA Mentorship Program, I immediately thought of my former high school orchestra teacher Mr. Jerry Jones. I applied right away and was thrilled when we matched up. Immediately, Mr. Jones began helping me strategize for my second year of teaching. Before the school year even got underway, he requested pictures of my classroom, helped me with structure and with understanding my resources. As the year started, he generously became a sounding board and asked great reflection questions. Mr. Jones went on a video call with my 9–12<sup>th</sup> grade students and got a feel for our typical rehearsal flow, then he made plans to visit Fairmont to prepare for an upcoming large-group contest. Due to our remote location, the students almost never get to work with different

orchestra teachers, and they were excited to have a new person guide their ensemble.

I could not believe how helpful it was to have the outside, experienced perspective in my classroom. There were elements of my teaching I had not thought twice about until Mr. Jones respectfully questioned some of my choices and caused me to reflect. The presence of such an experienced educator really helped me think about my strengths as a developing teacher and what habits I needed to change right away. Mr. Jones observed a whole day of teaching and was able to help me identify where I needed to focus my attention urgently and where I could relax and cut myself a break. We evaluated everything from the efficacy of my rehearsal warm up exercises to the humidity levels in the cello closet. Prior to working with a mentor, the smallest problem seemed like the largest. Working with Mr. Jones helped me to assess the proper weight of problems so I could actually focus on the aspects of my teaching and program that needed to change.

So many elements of that second year were smoother because of Mr. Jones. I reframed my perspective on elementary string curriculum and have a much better idea of what my goals are for the 5–6<sup>th</sup> grade students going forward. Our contest performance went well thanks in part to bowings that Mr. Jones helped the class refine. My high schoolers completed a survey at the end of the year and many of them mentioned how much they enjoyed working with a mentor in class. They said

it was so helpful to hear someone else give them new ideas and reiterate some of what they had already been hearing. Even when the pandemic struck, Jerry was there to reassure my choices and help me reflect on a challenging situation. As our year drew to a close, we scheduled a time to talk about our experiences and Mr. Jones reassured me that he will continue to support me however and whenever I need.

I would recommend the MNSOTA Mentorship Program to any and all educators who are interested and ready to reflect on their practices. A supportive mentor can provide the encouragement and perspective that young teachers need as they get their careers off the ground. Most of all, I am grateful for the guidance I have been given every step of the way that sustained me through the year and gave me a strong foundation for many years of teaching to come.

*Katie Koenning teaches at the Fairmont Junior and Senior High Schools. Gerard (Jerry) Jones began his teaching career in Superior, WI, and then on to Denfeld and Duluth East High Schools in Duluth, MN. He was the recipient of the MNSOTA Orchestra Teacher of the Year award in 1996 and is a three-time honoree in Who's Who among America's Educators. He has served as a clinician/ adjudicator/conductor for numerous ASTA regional contests and music camps in the Upper Midwest. He has retired from teaching at Stillwater Area High School. †*