

'Mr. Music' inspires scores of District 99 students

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DOWNERS GROVE – When longtime Downers Grove resident John C. Svoboda died Oct. 7, the 93-year-old left a 30-year legacy extending clear across the United States.

The musician, teacher and conductor, known affectionately to scores of students as “Mr. Music” and “Mr. S,” served the Downers Grove educational community, building its stellar music program before retiring to Naples, Fla., with his wife Doris in 1977, where he played violin in the Naples Philharmonic Orchestra.

His last time conducting the District 99 Orchestra in concert took place on May 22, 2013, on the South campus where his grandson Thomas Svoboda played string bass in the ensemble.

Robert Svoboda, the eldest of John C. Svoboda’s three sons, said his father’s passion for music extended beyond the classroom.

“He enjoyed not only teaching music, but playing music,” he said. “He

“He had a full life and he loved it. He enjoyed the kids and teaching, and it reflected in the type of orchestras he had and the contests where he got superior ratings. He was much loved.”

Doris Svoboda

John C. Svoboda’s widow



John C. Svoboda

led the Youth Symphony of DuPage, the Hinsdale Civic Orchestra and orchestral summer camps at Southern Illinois University. He also played in the Rockford Symphony.

“One thing that most people didn’t realize was that he was an avid weightlifter, a bodybuilder. People don’t normally associate that with a violinist. Before the high schools had workout weight rooms he would have students come to our home where he had built his own gym in the basement and worked with the ballplayers on strength training.”

Robert Svoboda said his father was so dedicated to music he brought his violin aboard the ship when he enlisted in the U.S. Navy in 1942 during World War II.

“He was on a minesweeper and was involved in quite a few of the landings to clear mines out of harbors to get

ships in to port,” he said.

Svoboda built his own feeder system in Downers Grove by teaching elementary, junior high and high school students.

“He touched many lives,” Robert Svoboda said.

“He was a very kind, gentle man and everyone loved to be around him,” said his daughter-in-law Bonnie Svoboda, Robert’s wife. “Whenever he put his mind to something he would do it.”

John C. Svoboda earned his bachelor of music in 1949 and his bachelor of music education in 1950 from Northwestern University before coming to Downers Grove, said his wife Doris Svoboda, adding that he brought a 100-piece orchestra to Dijon, France, in 1968.

“[He was] a wonderful violinist,” Doris Svoboda said. “I met him in 1949. He lived in Chicago and I lived in Berwyn.

I was working as a dental hygienist and was looking for something to do and I took private violin lessons from him.

“I apparently wasn’t as good a student as I could have been,” she said, sharing their family joke. “He told me, ‘I can’t teach you, so I might as well marry you.’ He was my life. We had 66 years of marriage. I think that’s kind of remarkable. We’ve had wonderful children who have turned out to be wonderful adults.

“He was just a very good person; not an evil bone in his body. He had a full life and he loved it. He enjoyed the kids and teaching, and it reflected in the type of orchestras he had and the contests where he got superior ratings. He was much loved.”

Longtime Downers Grove Community High School District 99 Board member Julia Beckman, a former music teacher, was a student of John C. Svoboda.

“He was a really gifted teacher, not only technically, but a really good violinist,” Beckman said. “He built our fabulous orchestra and band program. He was just such a supportive teacher; so encouraging, and he never lost his enthusiasm for teaching. He made us feel we were part of something bigger.”