

## LEADING BY EXAMPLE

In this year's Philanthropy Issue, we bring you the stories of educators leading by example in Door County (presented here in alphabetical order).

# Donna Briesemeister

by Jackson Parr

When visitors take their first trip to Washington Island they often exclaim how incredible it is to have such a thriving community in such a remote locale. Perhaps it's because they imagine a sense of isolation that they don't feel on the mainland. Perhaps they had a rough ferry ride. Or perhaps they just haven't met Donna Briesemeister yet.

Briesemeister has spent more than three decades on Washington Island, and many of those years teaching music in the Washington Island School District, which, at 70 students, is the smallest in Wisconsin.

When the district cut the program, the Washington Island Music Festival stepped in to revive a music-appreciation course. Before long, Briesemeister was providing music lessons and classes that went well beyond the modest salary she receives from the festival's administrators.

"Music is a bonding element, and that is part of our appreciation: what the music does for us collectively," Briesemeister said. "The music brings people together."

Ham Rutledge, president of the Washington Island Music Festival, said they jumped at the chance to support Donna in her work with students.

"She loves it," Rutledge said. "I think this is her life, and she keeps doing more and more things. We think she

is doing a superb job, and we are behind her 100 percent."

Briesemeister believes in the power of music to build community.

"We really don't have enough people in the school to perform, but my students are able to perform with the community concert band," Briesemeister said. "There is a bond, community-wise, in being able to participate together."

In the case of Washington Island's community band, the musicians her students meet can include former

"That's the whole business of community and love," Briesemeister said. "It's my privilege to have the opportunity to be in their lives and to affirm them and give them confidence."

In more than three decades on Washington Island, Briesemeister has taught multiple generations of some families.

"This is part of my contribution to their heritage because their parents were my students," Briesemeister said. "There is a trust factor that is irreplaceable."

Donna Briesemeister (center behind piano) has kept the Washington Island school's music program alive. Photo by Steve Waldron.



Chicago Symphony performers and others of national renown. Briesemeister compares it to LeBron James showing up for your local pickup basketball game.

"It's amazing how many people did [the band], some of whom had not touched an instrument in many years," Rutledge said. "It grew to be so popular that essentially we cut it loose and let her run with it."

She speaks of her work as enjoyment rather than obligation.

Briesemeister is acutely aware of what it takes to build community, and she shows no signs of slowing down.

"My feeling is, even though there is pressure we feel, we still have something to demonstrate about human compassion and caring that the world is hungry to know still exists," Briesemeister said. "I believe the music program and the community involvement enhance and invigorate the sense of community."