

Southeast Tech, Sheldon Brass Band mourn Beckwith

Gene Beckwith, the first man behind Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical's internationally recognized band instrument repair program, died Friday. He was 83.

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Gene Beckwith (right) started the Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical Band Instrument Repair program 40 years ago. He retired in 1994. Ten years later, the college hired son Greg Beckwith to lead the program. The older Beckwith died Friday. (Photo courtesy of Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical)

Gene Beckwith, the first man behind Minnesota State College-Southeast Technical's internationally recognized band instrument repair program, died Friday. He was 83.

Red Wing became a household name in the music industry, thanks to the string and band instrument repair programs. Beckwith was leading a high school orchestra in Fargo, North Dakota, teaching clarinet part time at Moorhead State University and fixing woodwinds on the side when he learned that Red Wing Technical College wanted to add a full band instrumental repair program to its offerings in 1976. The college needed a specialist to write the curriculum, build the lab as well as teach the course.

"I drove down, took one look and said, 'I'm your guy,'" he recalled in an interview a decade ago.

He was the key, former Supt. Dan Mjolsness said. To jumpstart the program and help graduates get jobs, Beckwith contacted band instrument manufacturers, spoke with directors and managers of major bands

and orchestras, and he passed out brochures by the hundreds at music conventions. He organized an advisory committee.

“People asked, ‘How can you start something like that?’ It became a model of the whole country,” Mjolsness said.

“He never felt he had to know everything, but he knew the people who did. He really became a conduit,” said John Huth, who became Beckwith’s associate instructor in 1987 and is still at Southeast Technical. “He really built those relationships, and we continue to do that today.”

The band program, like the separate string repair program that started a year or two earlier, gained national attention and eventually an international reputation. Students, many of them professional musicians looking to augment their incomes or practitioners needing to broaden their skills, came from across this continent as well as Asia, Africa and Europe.

“In the creation of our Band Instrument Repair program, Gene Beckwith left us with an incredible legacy,” Southeast Technical President Dr. Dorothy Duran said. “His work here established the college’s international reputation in the field and inspired hundreds of students through the years.”

Teacher, inventor

By 1989 the program boasted a 100 percent job placement and he was named Red Wing Teacher of the Year. A year later the National Association of Professional Band Instrument Repair Technicians honored him as its teacher of the year.

He officially retired from teaching in 1994, but kept repairing priceless instruments for professionals around the globe - and kept sharing his knowledge with anyone interested, friends said.

“If you asked him the right question at the right time, you would get this flood of information,” retired local band teacher Milt Hovelson said. “Everything about him exuded this ability to see a problem and come up with a solution. He would need a tool for a repair - tools that didn’t exist - so he would create them. Patented tools.”

Ken Roberts, who also taught band for Red Wing Public Schools until 2014, called Beckwith a master of instrument repair. “He could do anything. He made adaptations to instruments for my students who had handicaps. He was a hidden secret in Red Wing.”

Roberts said he was a junior in college when a friend studying instrument repair invited him to play with the Red Wing Ragtime Review. It was then that he and Hovelson, also a member, got an inkling to the depth of their future mentor’s skills - musical and mechanical. When old Mississippi Riverboat faltered, the captain often turned to Beckwith.

“He was phenomenal. Gene would actually go down and help him with his diesel engines,” Hovelson said. “We always laughed about it.”

Brass band is born

Hovelson and Roberts both chose to teach band in Goodhue and then Red Wing, thanks in part to Beckwith's influence. A few years later while playing in the Red Wing Brass Quintet with Cliff Emery, Bill Gillis and Bob Brodie, talk grew of creating a community band. Then Emery came back from a trip where he learned about a brass spinoff of the famous "Pershing's Own" U.S. Army Band. The idea of the Sheldon Theatre Brass Band was born. The five knew they wanted Beckwith to conduct. He led the first rehearsal in his college lab and the inaugural concert was in August 1989.

"We were dear friends, many dinners together and a few beers to go along with them. As band manager for 25 years, Gene and I had a special friendship," Gillis said. He called Beckwith "the ultimate musician who could perform on any musical instrument and speak with superb knowledge on them all."

Players came and went and often returned over the years. Andy Blackwood, tuba player, joined in 1992, the start of Beckwith's final season as the primary conductor, and has been with the group ever since.

"The Sheldon Theatre Brass Band brought the joy back to music for me after five dreary years in music school," Blackwood recalled. "I owe Gene and the rest of the band a tremendous debt of gratitude."

Greg Beckwith, who took over Southeast Technical's program 10 years after his father retired, said he also is grateful.

"He grew up needing to know how to fix or repair anything that a farm life required. I went to school and had a passion for the horn. Other than 'wanting' to discover how things worked, I had no such experiences - not for lack of opportunity, simply living in a different era, having different interests and different needs," Greg Beckwith said. "This is why I feel both privileged and honored to follow him in this field of musical instrument repair. If there is something in the 'Gene's' that I have been privy to, then I am blessed to have it given and I will strive in pursuit of his skills and excellence."

In the final months of Beckwith's life and the beginning Roberts' and Hovelson's retirements, the three men made time to visit. Beckwith often would play old vintage vinyl - yes, he still used records - of traditional, famous and unique music such as Arturo Toscanini with the NBC Orchestra.

"He would say, 'Here's an arrangement you haven't heard.' We were happy," Hovelson said.

"He was first a friend and then a mentor. Then in 1980 I took his class and he became my teacher - some of the favorite years of my life, really. Then he became conductor of the brass band," Hovelson said. "We've had all these connections through the years. I'm really going to miss the guy."

The funeral will be 11 a.m. Saturday at Christ Episcopal Church. The Sheldon Theatre Brass Band will play "Amazing Grace" and Beckwith's arrangement of "Pretty Red Wing."