When people receive a document in the mail from VanderCook, whether it’s a MECA brochure or an annual report like this, they know that it’s coming from people who take music and the impact of music education seriously. What might surprise them is that those documents are even printed by a family company that is just as serious about music, Grasso Graphics, Inc. “Music is a very important thing to our family, regardless of our business,” says Bert Grasso.

The company was originally founded by Bert and his father, Salvatore Grasso, who was a career music teacher and band director for 32 years. Though it might seem like a strange leap for a band director to found a printing business, the music education profession was beginning to look like a less reliable career option in the late seventies, while Sal was directing the band at Washington High School in Chicago.

“In 1979, the Chicago Board of Education went broke. I had two kids in college,” says Sal. “So, we re-mortgaged our home and put together a Kwik Kopy Printing franchise.”

Bert graduated from Northern Illinois University shortly after that, and the two founded the company together with Bert’s mother, Patricia. Later, they were joined by Bert’s brother, Mark, after he graduated from Columbia College in Chicago. The early days of the business were not easy, Bert recalls.

“Every customer was a victory. It wasn’t easy, for sure. My father would teach, and my mother and I would run the shop. My mother would be inside, and I’d be out...
on the street, trying to get a customer,” he says. “It was very exciting. I remember the first time we showed a profit, which was two and a half years into it.”

When the business was located on 79th St., in Chicago, the Grassos began doing more and more work for the Quinlan & Fabish Music Company, thanks to both the proximity of the two businesses and their relationships with the band community on the south side of Chicago. When VanderCook began looking for a new printer three years ago, George Quinlan Jr. recommended the south side printer. Since then, VanderCook has benefitted greatly from having a printer that shares its dedication to music and music education.

As the sons of a band director, it was a given that both Bert and Mark took instrumental lessons throughout their school career. Growing up, music was at the center of the family, even beyond their dad’s work. “Being in the band saved me,” says Bert, who remembers being incredibly homesick at the beginning of his freshman year of college before joining the Marching Husky Band. “I was the first to go to school, and I’m the oldest. I knew nobody! I made instant friends in the band. It was the reason for being there, as far as I was concerned. It kept me from hitting the road in the first week.” The next year, he would also meet his future wife in the band when she made the Huskies color guard and flag show.

Even though the printing business became successful, Sal continued teaching and finished out his career at Washington High School before retiring in 1991. He’s proud that, with the help of an active band booster organization, the marching band toured nationally, competed every year at the state marching band competition, and received a superior rating in the city contest for 20 years straight. “It wasn’t an average band. These kids performed, and they performed at a high level. The kids should be given the credit for that,” says Sal. He also credits the support of parents in the band boosters for making much of his band’s activities financially possible.

This lesson, that arts education needs to be financially supported to thrive, isn’t lost on any of the Grassos. “Every time there’s a political push-back to lower costs in schools, they always cut the arts. You’re going to cut off a beautiful endeavor at the knees and keep that from kids? It’s just wrong,” says Bert. “It’s very important to us that that doesn’t go by the wayside.”

Within a few short years, they have become regular attendees at the larger VanderCook events, and Grasso Graphics has stepped up to become an annual hole sponsor for the TrustTEE Open golf outing, and an event sponsor for A Night at the Pops. This is a no-brainer, as far as they’re concerned: to keep music in schools, you need great teachers to share it with students.

Bert still remembers the first time he heard about VanderCook as a high school trumpet player. “My ex-band director was Marty Oberman (M73). He would talk about it as though it were Yale. He’d never let you forget two facts about him: that he was a marine, and that he graduated from VanderCook,” he recalls. “I don’t think you people appreciate how rare an animal you are.”

Looking forward, Bert’s optimistic about the institution’s future. “I tell you what,” he says. “I cannot wait until you guys get that new building built. You guys are busting at the seams. It’s the one thing about that place that simply must change. You deserve that facility. It can’t just be a dream. It’s key to the college’s survival, and – more than that – it’s key to the college’s thriving. I really do believe that it’s absolutely paramount.”