



## The Impact of Giving

Every gift has a unique story behind it. Some people give to honor a loved one, or to convey pride and loyalty to their alma mater. Some stories are left untold, but forever lie deep within the hearts of those who are giving. Much like a musical composition, each gift tells a story, makes an impact that can last for generations, and has the power to change a life forever. Band director Blake Wiener is calling on us all to be composers of gifts.

Wiener's story begins with reflection. The son of a minister, Wiener struggled financially through college, but always seemed to find a helping hand when he needed it most. He recalls with gratitude the time his father sold the family car to pay for the English horn he needed to continue his studies. With the sacrifices made by his family, and through scholarships and community support, Wiener would go on to share his passion for music and inspire students for many years as a band director.

Wiener was introduced to VanderCook while on the teaching staff of the nationally acclaimed Lake Park High School Marching Band. Longtime friends and colleagues Ken Snoeck (HD '08), Kevin Lepper, and Stacey Larson (MMEd. '98), all played an important role in bringing Wiener into the ever-growing circle of the VanderCook family. Wiener quickly became a friend of the college, bringing his students to outreach events, and attending concerts, MECA courses, and special events every chance he got.

Wiener will put a VanderCook education against any school because he has seen first hand the quality of its student teachers. "They are

by far the most comfortable at teaching; they like to get their hands dirty and are not afraid to try things," Wiener says. He credits that to the fact that VanderCook students are exposed to all aspects of teaching regardless of their major discipline or comfort zone. "That kind of education is priceless and one of the biggest reasons I give to this institution." He goes on to say that he is always impressed by the feedback he gets from students, feedback that comes in the way of action, integrity, and word. He faithfully keeps the handwritten thank-you notes he has received from VanderCook students throughout the years.

Wiener believes a culture of giving is critical and should start with small steps. "Think about it. It can be as simple as giving up one night out to dinner a month. It's amazing, what you can work out, if you want to. I can't afford to give a lot but I have made it a priority. I have stopped giving to some other organizations because I believe so strongly in what VanderCook stands for." He challenges everyone to make an effort to give, even if the check may not be easy to write. "It's the checks that *aren't* easy to write that sometimes mean the most."

Wiener tells a story of a former student of his. Jason was a troubled young man, raised by his grandmother after his parents were no longer able to care for him. Jason had turned to music and joined the Medinah Middle School Band under Wiener's direction. He was determined to become a good percussionist, and through sheer determination, he made it on to the Lake Park Marching Band. Working with VanderCook percussion professor Kevin Lepper, he gained further

momentum, inspiration, and confidence. Jason told his grandmother that if he could continue becoming a better musician, he would attend VanderCook after high school to study with Lepper and ultimately become a music teacher.

This newly discovered confidence, purpose, and hope would sadly never get the chance to flourish. Jason's dream ended abruptly one fall night when he was struck and killed by a train, crossing the tracks on a dare. Although this incident occurred a decade ago, Wiener thinks of Jason periodically, of the life and talent cut tragically short. Earlier this year, he was surprised to receive a check from Jason's grandmother, along with a letter that struck him profoundly:

"The music program saved my grandson. You know his legacy; you've met his father. It's been ten years since Jason passed away. I know he had planned to go to VanderCook, but if you do something in the world of music with this money, it will be well spent, and I think Jason would agree."

Aware of the grandmother's financial situation, Wiener knew the gift was a significant sacrifice. He has often wondered how many Jasons are out there discovering themselves through the power of music, able and willing to share their gifts with the next person but not having the resources to see it through.

Passing that gift on to VanderCook reminds Wiener how grateful he is to have received so many gifts in his life. Stories like this one, he says, will encourage him to keep giving. "But it has to be a group effort," he says. "Things built by many are often more powerful than those built by just one. So are people."

Every opportunity to give has a story behind it. What's your story?

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