

Norvil Howell

As I began my teaching career in the early eighties, I used the ASBDA Curriculum Guide as a major resource. It was through this book that I first learned about the Clovis, NM band. The man responsible for building this program into one of the strongest in the country is Norvil Howell. Norvil is known for his wit, work ethic, musical excellence, and dedication to “always putting the student first.” I had the opportunity to interview Norvil and his wife, Elaine, in the spring of 2003.

Born in Independence, Kansas on October 25, 1931, Norvil remembers conducting a “bunch of singers and guitar pickers in church” as a child. One of his early childhood performances was singing a Gene Autry solo for a rodeo. (There are unsubstantiated reports that the livestock quickly recovered.) When he reached the 6th grade he wanted to be in band, but at the time his family could not afford to rent or buy an instrument. So, his first band director, August Krollman, offered to let him play a school owned mellophone. “It was green and had been soldered many times. (Mr. Krollman) says take it over to the shop foreman and let him blow some smoke through it and we’ll see if its got any leaks. So, we go over and he lights his pipe, sure enough there are some holes and he solders them up. Anyway, I started out on that!” A year later his father bought him his first horn, the only one purchased by his parents. He worked to buy every other instrument he owned.

Norvil began school in Sedan, Kansas. “It was about 1200 people and its main claim to fame is it is the birthplace of Emmett Kelly. Now, the people of the circus world will know that name because he was a world-famous clown with Barnum and Bailey Ringling Bros. and.... some say that kind of rubbed off on me.” Toward the end of World War II during his junior high years, his family moved to Artesia, NM where his dad found work in the oil fields while his mom took care of the home and Norvil. His first band director at Artesia was J. Bud Farrar, an excellent piano player, but he “only had rudimentary knowledge about bands.” However, he did teach Norvil how to transpose and got him involved in playing jobs around the area. By this time, he was also playing trumpet and with the war still going, he remembers playing Taps for many soldiers coming home to rest. It was “sad, very sad... I never got paid [for any of these] and wouldn’t [want to be paid] to this day... I think it is what you do if you are a trumpet player... as a service.”

He graduated from Artesia High School in 1950 and was recruited by then band director C.M. Stookey to attend Eastern New Mexico College, which became Eastern New Mexico University in 1955. Norvil always knew that he wanted to be a band director. In order to attend college, his parents co-signed a bank loan for one hundred dollars. “From then on I had to pay that note back plus I had to take out a loan at the beginning of each semester and then work in the cafeteria or wherever to pay that back, and that’s what I did until I got my degree.”

Unfortunately, during his first year of college, Norvil’s father passed away. He had to drop out of school and return to Artesia to help support his family. He worked at the Post Office until he was able to return to Eastern the next fall. Upon his return,

Floren Thompson had become the band director and Mr. Stookey became the Dean of the School of Music. Both Mr. Stookey and Mr. Thompson were important mentors to Norvil. Even with time spent at home after his father's death, he finished his degree in 1954. Throughout his college career, he played in various groups performing in nightclubs and roadhouses. "I played places with Western bands even with chicken wire up in front of the bandstand... so if they threw beer bottles, they would not hit the band."

After graduation he was hired at Muleshoe, TX (population 2500) to teach beginning band, junior high school band, high school choir, junior high school choir and high school band for a salary of \$3,800, which was \$1,000 above the classroom teachers' base salary. They had a six-period school day, so this teaching schedule gave him one planning period. However, he chose to do his planning outside of the regular school day and asked the superintendent; "Can I go... teach at the black school? [The superintendent] couldn't believe that. He says, 'You wanna do that?' I said, 'Yes. I've got a free period. I want to go over and start some kids on instruments,' ...and so I did." This is a testament to both Norvil's work ethic and his sense of social justice. Two years later when Norvil left Muleshoe for Clovis, three of these students transferred to Clovis High School.

Norvil considers himself an average musician and teacher, "but I have always tried to surround myself with guys that know what they're doing. I have been very blessed in that way." At Muleshoe he started this practice by having Harold and Darlene Van Winkle come over on Saturdays to teach private lessons. At the time both were still in college at Eastern. Harold went on to become a successful high school and college band director as well as chair of the University of New Mexico Music Department. Norvil also got Robert Page to come over and help with the choir classes. Robert Page was the choral director at Eastern who went on to serve as Assistant Conductor and Director of Choruses for the Cleveland Symphony. Norvil remembers that Muleshoe did not tell him about the choir classes until after he signed his contract!

His first spring band contest was one of many learning experiences for Norvil at Muleshoe. After he had finished sight-reading, he was grateful that the band had gotten through the piece without falling apart. However, a young man approached him and said, "Right this way." Norvil responded, "We're through, aren't we?" He said, "No. You've got to go march." Norvil's response was a fairly direct, "no we are not!" Although Norvil only taught there for two years, he remembers a lot of "neat" people in that community.

In the fall of 1956, Norvil accepted the band director position at Clovis High School in Clovis, NM. Those familiar with this program today may be surprised at the condition the music program was in when Norvil first arrived. I had the opportunity to visit with Harlan Beasley on several occasions before he passed away. Harlan was the principal at Clovis High School when Norvil was hired. Harlan told me, "Before Norvil came to Clovis that band could not even dress alike much less play together!" However, this is one of the factors that attracted Norvil to Clovis. He wanted to go to

school where he could build a program. He started out in 1956 with 45 students (half of whom were weak players) who rehearsed in a modified barracks building. Norvil remembers Mr. Beasley being extremely supportive, however the superintendent at the time was not too excited about hiring him. When asked what he would want in terms of equipment, Norvil responded; "'I'm going to teach a year and if you like what I do and you want to hire me back, then I'll submit a budget to you.'" One of his memories of that first fall was Wally Cleveland, band director at Highland High School in Albuquerque bringing his 100+ member band to Clovis for a football game. Norvil asked him to play the National Anthem, which he gladly accepted.

Over the next 24 years, he built one of the strongest programs in the country. The numbers in the high school band (grades 10-12) grew from 45 to over 200. The performance quality grew from offering a guest band the National Anthem to being recognized as the outstanding band at several national contests, being selected to perform at the Mid-West Band and Orchestra Clinic and representing the state in a Presidential Inaugural Parade. His approach continued to focus on surrounding himself with great junior high and assistant band directors, all who focused on developing musicianship with the concert band as the core using a team-teaching approach. Another key was the continued commitment of the Clovis school system to have qualified music teachers at every elementary school. He had as many students as possible study privately on their instrument by having instructors come from Eastern New Mexico University and West Texas University. Actually, Norvil would seek out private instructors wherever he could find them. A local music store owner taught many of his finest flute students as well as clarinet and saxophone. He even sent oboe students over to Amarillo, TX at one point to study with A. Clyde Rolling, then the conductor of the Amarillo Symphony. Combine this with weekly sectionals, a weekly full band rehearsal after school, aggressive teaching, and aggressive recruiting, you have his recipe for success. He would sum it up as developing an Espirit de Corps that did not exist in the music program prior to 1956.

In the early years, while maintaining his focus on concert band development, he put a lot of extra energy into the marching band. Clovis has had a long tradition of football excellence. Communities along the Eastern border of New Mexico share a similar football expectation with West Texas, the spirit of "Friday Night Lights." With communities in this area having such a strong focus on football, Norvil saw the opportunity to develop support for the band program through the football halftime. "I always tried to play to the audience... to entertain Joe Six-Pack on Friday night." He did not sacrifice quality, rather he presented a quality product that connected with the audience. With this approach, "the town got excited about band for the first time." This helped him build a strong political base for the music program. As the tradition of excellence grew, so did the public's recognition of it. "We met every Thursday after school for marching rehearsals.... Our drill field was on the corner of a busy intersection. You'd see people come by and they would hit those brakes... [in order to] watch the band. [There were] no collisions, but it's a wonder... if the football team lost a game... [community people] would say things like [the football

team] needs to work like the band works. Of course, I never did anything to dispel those rumors, but it was not quite the truth.”

During the sixties and seventies, band festivals like the Tri-State Festival in Enid, OK and the Buccaneer Festival in Lake Charles, LA had reputations for recognizing only the very best bands. Most of the bands attending during these years were well polished and yet very few superior ratings were earned. It was through these events that Norvil began to build the national reputation of the Clovis band program. Each trip to these events all had their own story.

Colonel Irons from Texas was judging sight-reading at the Tri-State Festival one year. “He was behind the desk in the sight-reading room smoking a cigar, a little baldheaded guy, and he said, ‘Here, take this score and look at it.’ So I take the score and I go over it with the band. We start playing... he was behind the band so I could see him... we played the introduction or whatever it was... and he gets up and I swear to God, he goes into the men’s room, and he doesn’t come out. He never came out. I thought... he went in there and died. I knew we were not reading too well, but I didn’t think it was that bad. He was alright, I guess... he gave us a “1” but I couldn’t believe [that he would leave the room while we were playing].”

Norvil’s sense of social justice was put to the test in one of his early trips to the Tri-State Festival. The Clovis band was integrated, and they had stopped for a meal at the Wagon Wheel Café when one of his black students comes to him and says; “Mr. Howell, they said we had to eat in the kitchen.” So Norvil said in a very loud voice, “Band, we’re leaving.” About this same time, the food was coming out of the window. The manager comes up, “What’s wrong?” Norvil tells him, “We’re leaving. Your waitress told one of my kids, the black kids had to eat in the kitchen. We’re not going to stay. We’re leaving.” The manager said, “Oh, it’s okay.” Norvil said, “No. His feelings have been hurt and their feelings have been hurt so we’re leaving.” This was his stance during a period of immense racial tension across the country.

Although many people who have met Norvil have experienced his humbleness and strong desire to deflect credit to those around him, they have also seen a strong competitive spirit. When asked about career high points, he responded that one of the high points was “when we went across the state line and beat Texas bands.” One year he took the band to the Buccaneer Festival in Louisiana. The program included March from Symphonic Metamorphosis, the Hindemith Symphony for Band, and Husa’s Music for Prague. Norvil really just wanted to come home with a superior rating. Eddie Green and the Lake Highlands Texas band were at the same festival and were in the same classification as Clovis, 4A. The judges refused to pick a winner for class 4A, so Clovis tied with Lake Highlands! This type of programming was fairly typical for the Clovis band.

In 1963, the Clovis band was enroute to Los Angeles to perform for a Rams game when they learned about President Kennedy’s assassination. Events all over the country were being canceled, even the American Football league canceled their games. However, the National League did not, so the Rams game would take place.

"We get there for the game and we get in the coliseum, one of the PR guys comes up and asks if there is there anything in your music that would be offensive? You know, in bad taste? There's going to be a memorial service for Kennedy in an adjoining building not too far from the coliseum. And of course, I said no, I don't think there is. We're doing [selections from the movie] Lawrence of Arabia and a couple other songs. They had people that threatened to lay down on the field [to protest the game being played] and there were cops around the track in case. Well, the announcer says - Ladies and gentlemen, the Clovis High School band from Clovis, New Mexico has raised a great deal of money to come out and we feel like they should be given the opportunity to perform on this occasion. We went ahead and did the halftime, and it was well received... In the Los Angeles Times the next day, Sid Love, who was the sports columnist at that time, had written - and the Clovis band played. They marched and their music was appropriate!" Another opportunity to play for the Rams came in the seventies, this trip was less controversial, and the band got to perform with Pat Boone.

It was Clovis High School Band's recording of Till Eulenspiegel, transcribed by Mark Hindsley, which earned the invitation to the 1969 Mid-West Band & Orchestra Clinic in Chicago. This international event is probably the most prestigious band event in the country. Clovis was selected to play a Friday night concert - 55 minutes of music and serve as the ensemble for William Revilli's Saturday morning clinic. In those days, during the concert there would be an overhead projector used to show the entire audience the score as an ensemble performed. The program included Fiesta Del Pacifica along with music from all different levels. Not only was learning all the music a challenge since this clinic always takes place in December, but how they got there is a lesson for all of us.

"We couldn't afford to fly [to Chicago]. Of course, the Chief came through in those days here. The Santa Fe Chief would come through from Chicago, it would come through from Chicago in the mornings on the way to Los Angeles and then the eastbound would come through in the evening on the way to Chicago. So, I called the local Santa Fe guy here and I said, we're trying to take our band to Chicago, and I'd like to know if I could get two chair cars and a baggage car? He checked on it and he said, No. We can't help you out. It's Christmas and we're very busy that time of the year. Now this is for young band directors I'm telling this story, too, because the most important person, one of the most important people you need to get along with is your custodian. Our custodian at that particular time was a guy by the name of Clyde Marsh. Clyde smoked cigars and I smoked cigars most of those years. I'd always give him a box of cigars for Christmas. There were four Marsh boys, and he was the only one that graduated from high school and he was our high school custodian, cleaned the band hall and cleaned the cafeteria, which was right next door to the band hall. His brother [Ernest] had dropped out of high school and went to work for the Santa Fe Railway system. [He] started here in Clovis... this was still a big railway center... He goes to Amarillo from here and then from there, he goes to Chicago, still with the Santa Fe Railroad. He works up through the ranks. And at the time that we were trying to take the band to Chicago, he was Chairman of the Board

for the Santa Fe Railway system. So here his brother is a custodian of the high school band hall in Clovis, New Mexico and whenever Ernest Marsh would come through in his private car, Clyde would go down to see him. When Clyde would get mail from his brother, it would come to the high school, and they'd put in my box. So... I had heard from the local Santa Fe guy, the superintendent here, he said, we just can't. Cars won't be available. They're too busy. Well, [I thought] we'll just have to go on buses. Clyde asked me one day, did you get your chair cars? I said, No, Clyde. We didn't get our chair cars. We're going to have to go on buses to Chicago. Well, a couple of months go by and he gets a letter. I could always tell, Ernest Marsh, Chicago up in the left-hand corner, so I take it out to him... in the cafeteria. I go on back to the band hall and he brings the letter over. The letter said, Dear Clyde, Enclosed is \$350 to fix your car. Tell Mr. Howell I'm working on the chair cars. We got the chair cars and our own baggage car, and we had such a crowd in the dining car going up there, they gave us our own dining car coming back. And it was all because of our custodian."

In January 1973 the Clovis band had the opportunity to march in President Nixon's second inaugural parade. "To get that invitation the Republicans said if you'd like to go to play for Nixon's inaugural parade, you've got to take the band to Albuquerque and play for Nixon's appearance there. So we go up to the Sunport and we're there with the band and all of sudden I notice these college kids are just all around. And so [Nixon] gets off the plane and we play. He starts over to the band as we're playing, and Pat was with him. All of a sudden, all these college kids start yelling. I can't tell you what they were saying but it was not nice. So [the Nixons] make a quick right turn and go down to where he's going to speak. Well, just before he leaves, one of the campaign staff members comes up and tells us to play continually until he gets on the airplane. That's to drown out all of the protests, Vietnam protest stuff. Well, we start playing and by that time there's all kinds of people inside the band. The ropes of the barricades were falling down with the people inside. And so we were playing and people all around are yelling profanity and everything. Finally, he gets on the plane and leaves. Well, we were invited to the inaugural parade, you know, but those protestors were everywhere."

Norvil knows first-hand the value of building strong relationships with all people. He has always taken extra time to visit with staff members and administrative assistants, because he knows they are the ones who get the "real" work moving. The continuity of having a great director in the same school for 24 years not only gives political benefits, but also allows for the joy of teaching multiple generations of the same family. At one point, there were over 20 Clovis band alumni who had gone on to teach band and many of today's community leaders in Clovis are band alumni.

In 1980, the school board felt that the system needed someone to coordinate all musical activity. This decision was influenced in part by Rollie Heltman, who was working with the New Mexico State Department of Education at the time and visited with the Clovis school administration regarding this issue. After 24 years of leading the Clovis band program, Norvil became the Music Coordinator. Although he no

longer was the Director of Bands, he did continue to stay involved in the classroom by teaching elementary band. Maintaining a direct connection to the students was important to him. He served as music coordinator for 17 years.

One of his most noteworthy accomplishments as music coordinator was the establishment of "Music in Our Schools Week." The activities were fairly diverse from year to year, but they always included a showcase concert that would include groups from band and choir as well as different grade levels. "It's a nice program and it gives an overview of the whole program. I would have a two-page spread in the Clovis news journal (newspaper) with pictures of the band and the choir [as well as] classroom shots. The whole thing, it's a big PR deal for us. The elementary schools [would] have art contests on the music, on a theme, and the kids [would] do little posters. We [would] have a poster contest. It's district wide. They had one in the school and then they had one for the entire district. And I always made sure that the trophies were bigger than anybody else gave out in the Clovis schools. I ordered [approximately] six thousand 'Music in Our Schools' buttons. Every kid got a button, so it's a big promotional thing. We had all choral night, which when you do that, that includes an elementary honor choir of about three hundred and fifty voices, you've got the combined junior high school choir, and the high school choir. Then that brings in about two thousand people to Rock Staubus Gymnasium. That's more people than they have at a basketball game. Then they have an all-band night program, which includes all three junior high school bands, the high school band, the high school jazz band and then a combined sixth grade band. And that group is a pretty good-sized group, so they'll run about twenty-five hundred for that audience. I always made sure [to] have the [district] business manager selling tickets or the Director of Instruction. You get those people [as well as principals] involved... helping take up tickets or passing out programs. I'd tell them, you'll see more parents at that than you will at PTO or PTA meetings and so you get those people involved and then they support the program. They feel a part of it and their names are in the [printed] program."

Norvil truly saw this position as a music advocate and in effect promoted the entire program in the same way he had been promoting the band. Also, during this time, the CBS Good Morning television show's theme song was "Oh what a beautiful morning." Following a suggestion made by Elaine, Norvil contacted the Amarillo CBS affiliate and arranged to have the 300-voice elementary honor choir sing this song. This type of national exposure made the Clovis community very proud of their music students. Often teachers feel like they are constantly fighting for their music program. Because of his proactive PR approach, there were not many battles to fight, forty-one years in the same district served him very well. Of course, this was a two-way street, Norvil was very supportive of his administration and the staff.

As a music coordinator with great relationships with all of the principals, Norvil was involved in the hiring of all music teachers in the district. Although he did not have the final decision authority, he did have a great deal of influence. What did Norvil look for when interviewing candidates for a position? "Well, of course, I'd like to

know what kind of program they came out of, high school program. I'd like to know how they found out about the vacancy. What is your philosophy of teaching? And that's been asked, I guess, forever. Do you feel that they should have time to be a part of the faculty? Now you know this as well as I do, a lot of guys in this business, they just get to be almost aloof to the rest of the teachers on the staff, - Well, I'm the band director and I'm a little bit better - and that's not a good thing. They need to be part of the faculty and they need to take an interest in what those teachers are doing in their classroom. If the speech teacher does something, they need to compliment, put a complimentary note in [their] box, or the drama teacher or whatever. And do you feel like students should be able to participate in sports and music, band and choir? Here in Clovis, they can't do that... If you have a kid in your class who's having trouble in math, would you be willing to forego band time or choir time for that kid to go in and make up work? Then I would ask why should we hire you. And of course, do you love kids?" The ultimate focus for Norvil is that a teacher always puts students' needs first.

At the same time that he became music coordinator, he also started the Clovis Community Band, an opportunity for those band students to continue playing their instruments. In 1994, he became the Executive Director for the New Mexico Music Educators Association. He held this position until 2003, spending countless hours serving the music students of the state. His two most notable accomplishments as the Executive Director: being the third state music education organization in the country to have an online presence and producing a promotional video to help all constituents better understand the value of the All-State Music and In-service Conference.

At the beginning of this article, it was noted that Sedan, Kansas was home to a famous clown. Although Norvil was not one to dress up in the clown uniform, he has always been a fan of great jokes, especially pranks. One of his favorites was with Jerry Hoover. "Jerry was the band director at state [NMSU] and I called him up and said, Mr. Hoover? This is Bill Jackson over here at Deming. You know, we're doing a rodeo parade this summer, Pioneer Days, and we want you to come over and be our grand marshal and ride a horse in the parade. And it's real quiet [on Jerry's end]. I said, by the way, I've talked to President Thomas [then president of NMSU] and he's all for this, and he wants you to bring the band. Well, it was summertime and, he couldn't say anything. 'Well, I don't know', he starts hesitantly. I had him really going. Well, I started laughing and he never let me forget that. These all come back to haunt me. Several years ago, I'm in bed and I get a telephone call. We'd just had the band out to the Grand Canyon. We played in Tempe, Arizona and came back through the Grand Canyon, and the phone rings at six o'clock in the morning. He said this is so-and-so with the motel at the Grand Canyon where we stayed. He said, 'I understand you were dissatisfied with our service at our motel,' and he had me going... He said, 'Now Mr. Howell, we want you to know that we don't appreciate your attitude,' and he really had me going. I was just getting ready to erupt. I said, you call me at six o'clock in the morning... and he just started laughing. He said,

Norvil, this is Jerry Hoover.” Jerry has a great memory and would sometimes wait years for the “payback.”

In the days when Clovis had a local TV station, Norvil enjoyed helping the station get the latest news items. One election year when George Umberson was the choir director at Eastern, Norvil called the TV station as the results were coming in and said, “This is Bill Jackson out here at Floyd, New Mexico. This should be of interest to area viewers. George Umberson has just been elected probate judge at Floyd by twenty-five write-in votes. And he [TV employee] said, ‘Oh, yes. Let me get this down. George Umberson has just been elected probate judge in Floyd by twenty-five hundred...’ He misunderstood, so I said, yes, twenty-five hundred people in Floyd. Well, he puts it on the television. Of course, it goes all over eastern New Mexico. And the Eastern choir was on tour. They tried to get him [Mr. Umberson] to get off the bus and take his job.” With a bit of help from Elaine, they contacted the station again during a winter storm and reported that the superintendent was closing all schools in Wheatland and Forrest. Both schools had closed in 1945!

I often think of Norvil as New Mexico’s Musical Statesman, a man who truly cares about the people he meets, musical excellence, and service to others. Although quite humble, his work has been recognized by the profession and his alma mater. He was the recipient of ENMU Distinguished Service Award in 1969, NMMEA’s Music Educator of the Year in 1988, ENMU Outstanding Alumni Award in 1995, NMMEA Hall of Fame in 2001, and the New Mexico Activities Association Hall of Fame in 2004. His former students and members of the Clovis community have established a scholarship in his honor as well. A perfect tribute to Norvil, a fund that continues to help kids.