



wayne Fenstermacher
1924 - 1993

News travels slowly. At least it does until you start reconnecting with your fellow Berlin alumni via mail, phone and the internet. A few months ago, Jeri (Polansky) Glass emailed me that someone had been in touch with her who heard from Carl, the oldest son of the BAHS music director from '68-'73, Wayne Fenstermacher, and that he had passed away while conducting a concert during the 1993 holiday season. The news that Mr. Fenstermacher was gone took a while to sink in. I remembered sending a card to Joe and Dorothy Ferguson in the mid-seventies and having Dorothy write back that Mr. Ferguson had died of a heart attack. Then I remembered further back, during my sophomore year at BAHS, when they were about to announce over the PA system that Norbert DeYoung had died. Vice-Principal Locher had taken me down to Mr.

Fenstermacher's music room to hear the announcement there. And now Mr. Fenstermacher is gone, too. But in many important ways, he's not -his dedication and never-ending perseverance lives on in us, his students. If you learned anything as a student of Wayne Fenstermacher's, it was strength. He probably coined the Nike phrase and should have been collecting royalties every time you hear: "Just do it." Without actually saying those words, and without being harsh or insensitive, he pushed us all beyond what we thought we were capable of doing. If you had a cold, you probably let that bug get you with your attitude, so just keep on going and you'll feel better. OK, maybe we didn't feel better, but we DID get through the concert, the show, the road trip, or whatever. THEN we felt better. When I look back on the concert and festival schedule we had, I wonder how there was ever time for school work. (Then I remember, the only homework I actually ever did outside of school hours was for math and science classes....sorry, Miss Beams and Mr. Leonard, but then...you knew that!) Born in Wyomissing, PA, of par-

ents descended from (you guessed it) window makers in Germany who sailed to the New World in the late 1600's and early 1700's, Mr. Fenstermacher attended Columbia University in New York City. He had been teaching in the Big Apple, where he had met his wife Helen while playing piano during his graduate days. Helen has one of the most beautiful voices I've ever heard, and she taught private vocal lessons to me and many others in Germany. After seeing an ad in 1957 for teachers to go overseas, the family took the big boat over in 1958 where he became music director at Kaiserslautern. From Kaiserslautern he went on to Frankfurt, then to Munich in 1961, where he staged lavish musicals, including "The Mikado," "Showboat," and "South Pacific." He had quite a following in Munich, and a lot of support--everyone wanted to be involved in the music program if they could. It must have been this heritage that made him want to produce musicals at BAHS, as David Hall had done before him; but with the shrinking population of upper-classmen in Berlin, we ended up scaling them down to shows where we dressed in costume and did excerpts

from musicals. Thinking back on it, this probably gave us all more experience in a variety of styles than had we done a full musical once a year. It was in Berlin that he first was handed the responsibility of the marching band. Though it wasn't his thing, as we used to say, he delved into it and made it the best he could. There were times we barely had enough marchers on the field to form a "B." We marched in snow till we could no longer see the yard lines--brass players will remember trying to keep their mouthpieces from freezing to their lips. We marched after night fall; with northern Germany's days so short, there was little light available in the practice hours before and after school. We learned to keep going, no matter what. At one point drum majorette Beverly LaCour had lost her whistle, but she didn't miss a beat, and hollered out in her best Louisiana drawl: "Twoo-oo-eall! Tweet-tweet-tweet!" and off we all marched. We made trips on the overnight train to travel with the football team. This was no small task for a teacher to organize, since everyone had to have military travel orders cut. Then there was the challenge of keeping us sepa-

rated on the train by gender...Some of my friends weren't even supposed to be traveling on that train, due to their dads' positions, but somehow we made it--apparently with escorts we didn't even know were aboard. Looking back through my scrapbook, I found photos from the Berlin Observer and the Stars and Stripes of Mr. Fenstermacher conducting concert after concert, accepting donation checks from the music boosters and wives' clubs, and an extensive interview when Berlin hosted the spring music festival, THE major event in our musical lives each year. In my photo album is a photo of a cold, wet band member wearing his raincoat at a football game. (We needed to suffer and be toughened, not die of pneumonia). In addition to the regular band and chorus program, Mr. Fenstermacher also started a glee club, the Nightingales. If we had people who could sing, we had people who could sing better...so he pushed us further, and then a little harder. Son Carl was recruited, too, along with some of his friends, and he didn't cut them any slack either. But anyone with any talent--whether in chorus or band--was given solos, and learned

to overcome stage fright and use it to advantage. If you showed leadership skills, you were going to end up as drum majorette, band president, or equipment manager. Throughout his career there were late night rehearsals, weekends on the road, and hours of classroom preparation. According to Carl, he seemed to love it, but the stress was very hard for him to endure. He did not talk about it, to his family, but they knew. After Carl graduated from BAHS in 1973, the Fenstermachers stayed on one more year, then finally decided that after 16 years in Germany, it was time to go home. Home for him was the New York City area and for Helen was North Carolina. Trying to get a job in the south must've been like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole, though. He landed a position as the music director at Columbia High School in Maplewood, NJ and began there in the fall of 1974. He took on the chorus, concert band, and even the marching band at first. As the years progressed, he weathered the changing attitudes from school boards, especially with respect to religious sensitivity and school politics. He stayed out of the in-

fighting as much as possible, focusing on the students and on presenting programs with everyone in mind. He created a learning environment geared toward cultivating complete musicians. On December 3, 1993 Carl's mom called to tell him that his dad had had a massive heart attack that morning during a winter concert for a ladies' retirement home, and had died practically before he hit the ground. We can only imagine the shock this was to his family and students. He had never had any kind of heart problem before and was only 69 years old. Carl told us that hundreds attended his memorial service the following Monday, including some from our generation, who stood up and expressed how Wayne Fenstermacher had helped them both musically and in life by making them keep on going, even when they wanted to quit. Professional musicians, writers, even directors, gave hours of anecdotes from the time they spent as his students. Some even told how they had lacked a reason for living until Mr. Fenstermacher got hold of them in music class, and then went on to attribute their resulting career success to him. When I think back of all

the truly inspirational teachers I had during the seven years we were in Berlin, it's hard to pinpoint which characteristics of my success or my attitudes resulted from experiences with which instructor. But looking back on my career path from where I am now in design center management, and recalling those who questioned whether I was geared for this field, it may be that I'm doing well in a creative position because dedicated teachers like Mr. Fenstermacher instilled the drive to do my best in all undertakings so that I'd never have to say I should have tried harder. As for the love of music, it has taken me through a second bachelor's degree in music history, and on to having been principal oboist for the Scottsdale Symphony Orchestra, and is still a source of enjoyment and relaxation. In fact, I'm taking guitar lessons and actually do practice now. Amazing. A number of both Helen and Wayne's students have gone much further musically than I have-- many have performed on and off Broadway, in musicals like 'Grease' and 'Cats'. Several went on to the Met and other opera houses in the country. He really encouraged us to reach

for the extra energy and do our best. He taught us the value in perseverance. Hearing how he left this world, I suddenly remember singing in a concert for a retirement home in Berlin. Afterwards, an elderly woman came up to me with tears in her eyes, grabbed my hand and thanked me, and asked me to thank the others "for our wonderful voices." And that's what it's all about, isn't it?

*Tribute by:
Diane (Green) Kempton
BAHS Class of '72*

Thanks to Carl Fenstermacher for the background on his mom and dad. Both Carl and Hans welcome email from fellow Berliners and also can pass any messages on to their mom.

Carl may be reached via email at: cten5@ix.net.com

The address for Hans is: hansf@architext-usa.com

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