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## Show Time

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# Music Man

## At age 81, Manahan directs his 81st high school musical in grand style.

Story By HANNAH GRIFFIN '12

For Robert Manahan '52, the energy of the students in his music classes is infectious.

"Young people keep me young! If you see me, I certainly don't look 81 years old," Robert promises, speaking over the phone from Hall High School in Spring Valley, Ill., where he passes on his love of music and theatre to his students by directing plays and musicals at the high school.

A 1948 graduate of Hall High, Robert enjoys working at his alma mater, though his return there was a bit unexpected. After teaching music at LaSalle-Peru and Putnam County high schools in Illinois, he retired in 1993. However, "when you're a musician, music is the bug in you," he says, explaining his decision to return to Hall to teach part-time in 1999. He is completing his 81st show this spring when Hall High presents *A Grand Night for Singing*, a music review compiled by Robert, in May.

While Robert says his favorite part of putting on shows is "creating characters and watching them come to life," he also thinks that participation in the fine arts creates character in his students. He notes that teenagers today lead complicated lives and that being part of a show can give them "something to hold on to" when they are struggling.

After graduating from Illinois Wesleyan with a bachelor's degree in music education and a master's in vocal performance, Robert spent three years with the Dominican Order. Although he decided his true calling was to teach the performing arts, he still lives by the Dominican motto *contemplata aliis tradere* (to contemplate and to give to others the fruits of our contemplation). "After all," Robert says, "that's what a teacher does and that's what an actor does, too."

His former student, Cindy (Morris) Myers '80, attests to Robert's commitment to impart knowledge, experience and a joy for music. Now an Allstate Insurance agent in Normal, Cindy sang in Robert's choir for four years and performed in three musicals he directed at LaSalle-Peru High School.



Waving to the audience at the end of each performance is a tradition for Manahan's Hall High School Advanced Choir. (Photo by Karen Klopocic)

"It was where I grew to love choral singing," Cindy says. "You can decide to sing a solo any time. You and many others have to make that same commitment to sing as an ensemble. It is the ultimate team effort. I have used those skills and that example for my entire life in music and in life.

"He really brought out the best in all of us."

A testament to that ability is the number of those who have gone on to successful careers as performers. They include Frank Vlastnik, a 1987 IWU theatre-arts graduate who is now a noted stage actor and award-winning author. Cindy, who has stayed in touch with Robert, says that his devotion to his students has not faded over the years. At 81 years old, directing his 81st show and teaching for his 51st year, "he is still as committed to student growth as ever. He inspires me," Cindy says.

In fact, Cindy names Robert as the key influence in her decision to attend the University as a music major. "There wasn't a week that went by in four years that he didn't sing the praises of Illinois Wesleyan," says Cindy. "IWU was my only choice."

For Cindy, Robert represents all of the teachers who have served to inspire. "I hope that his story reminds us each of a teacher that made a difference in our lives," she says. "We must tell these professionals what they mean to us."