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81-Year-Old Alumnus Directs 81st High School Musical

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – For five decades music teacher Robert Manahan has directed high school theatre in Illinois, and at 81 years old he shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, the IWU alumnus ('52) is currently working on his 81st show.

Manahan will present *A Grand Night for Singing*, a musical review he compiled, at Hall High School in Spring Valley, Ill. on May 3. He credits his unflagging enthusiasm for music and theatre to the infectious energy of his students.



Robert Manahan at a recent choral concert at Hall High.
Photo Courtesy of Karen Klopic.

“Young people keep me young! I certainly don’t look 81 years old,” Manahan said. Even after directing 81 shows, he says he still enjoys “creating characters and watching them come to life.”

The teacher believes that participation in the fine arts also creates character in his students. He notes that teenagers today lead complicated lives, and that often being part of a show gives them “something to hold on to” when they are struggling.

Still, directing his 81st show at 81 years old is a milestone he almost didn’t reach. Manahan retired in 1993, after teaching at both LaSalle-Peru High School and Putnam County High School.

However, staying retired proved to be a challenge. “When you’re a musician, music is the bug in you,” he says. Manahan returned to his alma mater Hall High in 1999 in order to continue passing on his love of music.

A deeply religious man, Manahan still lives by the motto he learned during his time with the Dominican Order, the global Order of Preachers: *Contemplata aliis tradere*. “It means, to give to others the fruit of your contemplation,” he explains, “After all, that’s what a teacher does and that’s what an actor does, too.”

Cindy Myers, a class of 1980 IWU alumna and Bloomington-Normal Allstate agent, was Manahan’s student at LaSalle-Peru High. Myers attests to “Mr. M’s” earnest desire to impart knowledge, experience and a joy for music to his students.

“He knows how to communicate that enthusiasm to his students to help bring that into their singing. He really brought out the best in all of us,” said Myers.

According to Myers, the personal attention Manahan gives 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,” said Myers.

In fact, she names Manahan as the key influence in her decision to attend Illinois Wesleyan. “There wasn’t a week that went by in four years that he didn’t sing the praises of Illinois Wesleyan,” said Myers, “IWU was my only choice.”

It seems that the teachers who mean the most to us are the teachers who make us believe that we mean something. “I hope that his story reminds us each of a teacher that made a difference in our lives, said Myers, “We must tell these professionals what they mean to us.”

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