Josh Lanza
Memoir

Why Teach?

When I was in high school, sitting in a fairly cold auditorium in my senior year, the superintendent asked for a show of hands to tell her who knew exactly what profession they would like to go into eventually. I proudly raised my hand with a smug smile on my face, as I easily knew what I wanted to do. Then, I looked around that large room and saw how many of my peers had their hands raised as well. Well over seventy five percent of them had their hands held high. I laughed inside my head for I knew they were clearly lying. They probably had no clue what to do, and most would head to the local community college to get an associates in general studies or just play around there for a year or three while changing their major until they got the idea. The others, who didn’t raise their hands, either did not have an idea at all or they were just asleep and not paying attention whatsoever. I, however, had an idea and that idea has not changed to this day. However, to further explain that idea I have to take you a bit further back in time to my freshman year where it all began.

I came to Herkimer High school in ninth grade transferring in from the local Catholic school, St. Francis de Sales, one of the last of its kind in the Mohawk Valley, and I was one of the last of my kind. I was from the last eighth grade graduating class of that school. During my time throughout elementary and middle school, I had taken piano lessons and walking in the doors of the high school, I knew that music was going to be my greatest ally in making any friends. I was correct in thinking that. Most students at Herkimer liked music, and they liked it even more if somebody they knew could play it.
When entering ninth grade year, I had a vision. My vision was that someday I would be the head of my family’s business, Custom Tool and Model Corporation, CTM for short. CTM was a machine shop founded by my grandfather and is being run to this very day by my mom and my two uncles. Ever since I was a child, I was told to be an engineer and run the business. Going into high school, I still had that idea on my mind so I signed up for Mr. Raymond Pitcher’s “Drawing for Design and Production” class or DDP. It was my first step in achieving that goal.

On my first day of classes, Mr. Pitcher made it very clear that even though his class was an elective, he did not see it as such. He considered it a core course, and the work load there was as much as my English, History, and Mathematics courses combined! As September turned into October and then October turned into November, I found myself spending countless hours in Mr. Pitcher’s room working on project after project giving up lunch with my friends and spending many hours after school, to the point where even the janitors were beginning to wonder why I spent so much time in there. It was all to keep my GPA up of course, as I truly struggled to keep a ninety average in that class. The only relief in that god forsaken room was that in the colder months, the heating in the room was a blessing and in the warmer months, the air conditioning kept me and the four rows of computers nice and cool.

Even though much of my days in ninth grade were consumed with the drudgery of DDP, I had to find an escape. I needed my music. That is where my choir teacher, Mr. John Krause, comes in. Ever the caring man about musicians, he would let me into that musty and cold auditorium to practice my piano whenever I could find a free block of time. For that, I was ever grateful. I regretted that in my first year of high school, I could not take his choir class because DDP was scheduled at the same time. I love to sing and Mr. Krause knew it. I only got a taste of
what choir was like when I participated in my first musical, “Damn Yankees.” When I sang in that group, I knew I wanted to do more. The music was calling me. The endless drawings of Mr. Pitcher’s class were only turning me into a zombie drone of engineering. I needed the smooth feel of piano keys, not the cold hard steel of the lathe.

However, my family still played a part in my career choice, and I needed some more hands on time at the shop. After all, I could still clearly remember, at the age of three, hearing my grandfather’s voice say as I sat in his big leather boss chair, “Joshua, someday this will all be yours. You will be the boss!” I liked the idea of being the boss very much. That is until I saw what the boss did.

Having survived the endless projects of DDP, I spent the summer working for my uncle as the maintenance man of the shop. My job consisted of a steady diet of grimy grunt work armed with a bucket of soapy water and an Oral-B toothbrush. My uncle would tell me these jobs would remind me to stay in school unless I wished to suffer this fate for life. Back then and to this day, CTM employs about twenty five people on average, and they each bring their own sets of talents and headaches to the boss. My uncle has to deal with them all individually and hire and fire many. As my toils continued, I also noticed that more often than not, my uncle would be on the phone with business calls to clients, making talking to him in general very difficult. He is certainly much easier to get along with outside the shop floor rather than on it.

Eventually though, I was able to talk to him about his job. I came in on lunch break with a sweating bottle of Pepsi in hand on a hot and humid August day while he was practicing his putting stroke on a makeshift green in the corner of his office. His back was turned to me, and I heard the rhythmic tick of the metronome in the right corner keeping time with the stroke. As the
putter clacked along the backside of the ball, I gave a courteous knock and entered. When he saw me come in, he smiled and had a seat. He invited me to do likewise as he would with any of his employees. Like all his employees, he asked me how my day was going as he unpacked his own lunch. I told him, in the calmest of manners, I was debating with myself about the idea of running this place someday because frankly I was tired of seeing him stressed out or on the phone constantly. The expression on his ever placid face at hearing this was not reassuring at all. In that moment, I was not in the big boss’s chair hearing that everything would be mine. No, that was a childhood fantasy. I was now sitting on the opposite side of my uncle’s desk, on a small stool not really fit for an adult, and he said quite frankly, “Joshua, if you really want to continue a career path here, I will not stop you, but honestly there is no money to be made here in the Mohawk Valley. You should really look elsewhere.” At that point, I didn’t know what to say. I just stared blankly, stood up, and casually walked out of the office. My face had lost color and my mind was about as fried as if someone had cracked my skull open and cooked my brains on that scalding August asphalt. I found it rather hard to work the rest of that afternoon. The only thing left for me to turn to once again was my piano. I grabbed my Beatles book, played, and thought that I had enough of Mr. Pitcher and his technology classes. I needed to get into choir, and I did.

As the next year of school began, I entered the halls to the sounds of hurried footsteps, slamming locker doors, and the ever awkward conversations of classmates reuniting. It would have been time for Mr. Pitcher’s “Principles of Engineering” class, but this time, I took the opposite corridor to head to Mr. Krause’s choir room. Before I could go, I heard from behind me Mr. Pitcher’s stocky, old man voice, cry out to me. He turned me around and questioned why I
left him. I told him I wanted to give music a shot. He asked, “What about CTM?” I told him with a grin I would worry about that later.

I got to the music room and took an open seat and could see the beaming faces of students ready to put their voices to use. All of my classmates were discussing what the song choices were this year, their favorite bands, and such. Not long after, Mr. Krause pops out of his office as the bell rang. He smiled, took attendance, and then said, “Okay my children, stand up and warm up!” We sang that day and sang hard. Warm, rich sound filled that room and for once my voice was really being included. Thanks to my piano background, I already knew how to read the music, and I got along with everyone really well. Unlike every other class in the building, where you were in a constant contest with all the other students for a better grade, here, we were one unit working for a common goal. With some help from our awesome teacher, we sounded better than ever. As one month turned into the next, instead of dreading what grade I would get on my next design paper, I enjoyed the harmony I created with my fellow classmates.

I listened to every bit of knowledge that came from Mr. Krause, and I cherished it. It would only make me a better singer and musician as a whole. The critiques he gave me were the ones I found myself caring about more than the ones any other teacher gave me. It was the choral events that I looked forward to most, and it was in Mr. Krause’s room where I felt most at home when I was at school. The more I stood around the piano and sang with my classmates, the more I realized that this is what I want to do with my life. I did not just want to perform music though. I wanted to bestow my knowledge of music onto others. I wanted to teach. I wanted to be like Mr. Krause, who goes to work every day with a smile on his face even when days are rough. I wanted to do what I loved for a living, and I loved music and helping others discover music.
My next two years of high school only affirmed that I wanted to be in the music teaching world. I was taking as many music courses as I possibly could from Music Theory to Rock and Roll. I told Mr. Krause about my goal, and he has been more than one hundred percent behind me and still helps me out to this day to achieve my dream. Today, my path has changed slightly as I chose the stability of English education over the unpredictability of music education in the current education climate. However, I am still bringing music to my classrooms as I have my students think critically about poetry and composition. I encourage my students to identify and analyze lyrics of bands like The Beatles and Pink Floyd for the deeper meaning held within. Just as music helped me make friends in high school, it is now helping me connect to students in a positive way in the classroom. So maybe the family business won’t be mine someday, but when someday comes, I expect to have something even better.