HEN ASKED HOW he knew he wanted to make music his career, Dr. Tom Evans, conductor of the Kalamazoo Concert Band, says, “It’s one of those clichéd lines … it wasn’t something I wanted to do; it was something I had to do. Every musician will tell you that it really is a calling … it’s something I think that happens organically, systematically, something that happens in the interior of the soul and mind and psyche that really molds a musician.” He adds with a grin: “It’s just kind of California.”

Indeed, an old friend and fellow third-grade classmate recently reminded him that when their teacher asked the class to draw a picture to Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons,” Evans asked her if he could conduct to it instead. She conceded, and his friend remembers him “conducting” the music while everyone else drew pictures.

He also recalls what it felt like to listen to a live professional ensemble for the first time as a teenager: It was the Pittsburgh Symphony playing Brahms. “I had an OMG experience … I said ‘wow,’ this is what a live orchestra sounds like, because I remember hearing it on vinyl … on a really, really pathetic sound system … and to hear the music realized in real time on real instruments was an amazing experience.”

Evans, who now conducts the Kalamazoo Concert Band and is the director of bands and a professor of music at Kalamazoo College, grew up in rural western Pennsylvania where he helped his neighbors as a farm hand. His childhood music experiences were limited to playing in school bands and a short stint in high school with a jazz/rock band styled after the music groups Chicago and Blood, Sweat and Tears.

He never owned an instrument or had private music lessons until he was in college. He knew by his early teens, however, that the world of music was where he was headed.

He says his father, a steel worker with a passion for classical music and an extensive classical record collection, taught him to love music. However, his call to be a musician was not encouraged by the elder Evans. His father saw a career in music as a road to poverty. “When I told him I was going into music, he said, ‘Why do you want to do that? It’s a starving profession,’” says Evans. “It was a killer, so I had this self-doubt all through my life.”

Nevertheless, he followed his heart. Although neither of his parents attended college, he enrolled as a freshman at Edinboro State University in Pennsylvania. There he took a work-study job in the instrument storage room where he was able to use one of the trombones to practice. He soon became the best trombone player on campus and realized he needed a bigger challenge.
His sophomore year he transferred to the State University of New York at Fredonia where he received a degree in music education. For three years he worked as a high-school band director in Hamilton, N.Y. Wanting more, he returned to school, this time to Boston University for a master’s degree in trombone performance and music education. During the summers he worked at Tanglewood Music Center, a summer music academy in Lennox, Mass. There he enjoyed conversations with music legends Leonard Bernstein and Aaron Copeland.

Following graduation, Tom spent a year as a freelance trombonist in Boston. “It was very adventurous,” he says. However, “It’s a real hand-to-mouth existence … there are some months you live well, and other months you worried if you could pay the rent … so it was hard.”

Knowing that he had a passion for teaching and wanted a family, he went on to become a high-school orchestra conductor in Monticello, N.Y. But once he was there he realized he wanted to move on to higher education. So he decided to move to Ann Arbor and earn a doctorate in trombone performance at the University of Michigan.

A cutely aware of the old saw in the music business that: “Every hour you are not practicing somebody else is,” he practiced eight hours a day. At that point in his life he says he was in the top one-half percent of the trombone players in the country and the idea of being a professional musician beckoned. He ultimately decided, however, that he would find greater satisfaction teaching.

Tom does not regret his decision. For eight years he taught at Alfred University in upstate New York and started a family. In 1995 he was hired to teach music at Kalamazoo College.

Years before he had heard a fellow doctoral student at University of Michigan from Portage speak highly of Kalamazoo College, “so it was on my radar,” he says. It turned out to be a great fit—while Kalamazoo isn’t a large, expansive city—it pulses with life. He felt like it was a place where he could make a difference.

Evans now conducts the Kalamazoo College Symphonic and Jazz Bands. He also teaches courses in jazz appreciation and music education. One of them is essentially a beginning band course that he says has turned into the largest class on campus. “I don’t know why it’s such a big hit,” he says, laughing.
Evans

The class is open to all students, regardless of music experience. What makes it work, he says, is that he divides it into thirds: a third with a strong music background, another third with some experience, and the final third, typically, can’t even read music. They come to the class armed only with a strong desire to play an instrument. Balanced instrumentation and tuning and phrasing work also help, says Evans.

Over the years this Kalamazoo College course has grown from about 12 to more than a 100 students a term. “They love it … it’s fun and they’re learning,” says Evans. “And what could be better? I mean you’re not sitting in a classroom … you are playing the saxophone, you are playing the trombone … its active learning.” Progress is rapid: They go from playing “Hot Cross Buns” to playing legitimate middle-school band music. The verdict: “We sound good!”

Evans also gets terrific results when he conducts experienced musicians. His jazz bands have toured overseas in Russia, Estonia, Finland, and Tunisia. Cities toured in the United States include Chicago; Washington, D.C.; Cincinnati; and Detroit. In 2004 he took a seven-piece jazz combo from Kalamazoo College to Numazu, Japan, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the sister-city relationship between Kalamazoo and Numazu.

In 2002 he was made the conductor of the Kalamazoo Concert Band (KCB), one of the oldest community bands in Michigan. It’s made up of more than 100 southwest Michigan musicians and is celebrating its golden anniversary this year.

Evans has two college-age children (twins) who are now pursuing music careers. His son plays bass trombone at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and his daughter is a vocal performance major at Western Michigan University.

His childhood dream of teaching and conducting music fulfilled, Evans continuously seems to marvel at his career as a music maker and teacher. “Seriously,” he says, “every day I wake up, and I’m so thankful for the path I’ve chosen.”

Boost Your Savings.
Increase Your Productivity.
Make the Switch.
To Cornerstone Office Systems

As an award-winning office equipment provider, we’ve been adding value to business in West Michigan for over 10 years.

Let us add to yours.

The Document Solutions People
www.cos-mi.com
269.321.9442