

Tribute on Behalf of Warren Wilson College for Steve Williams, D.M.A.

By Philip Otterness • Delivered January 11th, 2020

It is my honor today to say a few words on behalf of Warren Wilson College in tribute to Steve Williams and his many contributions to this institution. Steve spent his entire professional career here—almost 40 years—starting at the age of 25 as the Chapel and College Organist and joining the faculty of the Music Department at the ripe old age of 26. His accomplishments at the College were many and varied and demonstrated that his skills extended far beyond being a great organist and musician. In the eyes of the College, he was, first and foremost, a talented and much-loved teacher. It is no surprise that he was the first recipient of the College's Teacher of the Year Award, nor is it a surprise that many of his former students are here today to honor him. He also contributed to the College in other ways, serving in a variety of roles, including Music Department Chair, the head of the Committee on Extended Contracts, Student Crew Supervisor, and—that most dreaded of positions—Building Manager. Of course, the way that many of us remember Steve most is his leading us in song. How many times did the poor man have to drag us through the *Alma Mater*?

But a mere list of awards, committee positions, and other accomplishments does not do justice to all that Steve did for the College. In my brief remarks, I want to focus on one contribution in particular. At a College that promotes, above almost all else, the ideal of a

deep and shared sense of community, Steve was one of the few who actually made this elusive ideal a reality. He did this, of course, through music, but not in a way that centered on his own tremendous musical talent. Rather, he served as an eager shepherd to a flock of less musically-skilled members of the College—students, staff, faculty, and volunteers—gathering them together into a group that worked hard, supported one another, and shared the beauty, laughter, and exuberant spirit that comes from working toward a common goal. Steve pulled this off most notably in two ways—as the Music Director of an amazing range of musicals that the College produced for well over two decades and as the Director of the College Choir. I remember especially when Steve would bring the College Choir to perform at the Senior Dinners, and I'd look on in wonder as this ragtag group of students—many of whom I could picture in my own classes, slouching in the back row and thumbing through their iPhones—now produced music so joyous and beautiful it brought tears to my eyes.

In some ways, this emotional experience was one that Steve and I shared. You see, sometimes Steve would invite me to play my French horn at a church service, and we'd be rehearsing up there in the balcony, going over my part again and again, and it was at those times that somehow my playing also seemed to bring tears to Steve's eyes. [...] But, you see,

this is what made Steve so skilled in creating community. Despite his own great talent as a musician, he was always the gentle and patient teacher, perfectly happy to welcome anybody to his ensemble, regardless of their dubious skills, as long as they shared his devotion to music and musical performance.

Over the last few weeks when I've talked to folks about Steve's legacy at the College, what comes up again and again are the many musicals where he served as Music Director and the magical sense of community that was created for all who participated in and observed those productions. Although these were College events and always centered on the students, they were also truly community affairs. I can remember sitting in the pit orchestra with a student on one side, a member of the college staff on the other, and, in front of me, somebody from Swannanoa or Black Mountain. Of course, there were many other equally dedicated and skilled people with whom Steve collaborated to produce these musicals, and Steve, himself, never thought the productions revolved around him. Still, when the overture began, Steve was at the center of it all, directing the pit orchestra and conducting the singers on stage, all the while pounding out the melodies on an old upright piano wedged into the pit along with the rest of the orchestra.

It was a wonderfully exciting community to be a part of, and, as a member of the orchestra, it was a special feeling to know that, despite your many shortcomings as a musician, Steve seemed to completely trust that his quick downbeat—only visible as he extended his hands beyond the sides of the piano—was enough to get you going through pages and pages of music as the actors and musicians hurtled their way through the opening number. What a feeling of confidence and accomplishment that gave us.

And when we fell short, Steve—who, by the way, always seemed genuinely puzzled that we somehow lacked the sense of rhythm

or musicianship that came naturally to him—always let us down gently. I can remember in the midst of one musical, as I played blithely along on my French horn, Steve's face suddenly appeared around the edge of the piano and gave me a look that somehow encapsulated, in just a short second, the message that "Yes, I know you have practiced hard on this and are trying your best, but you're a half a beat behind and a quarter tone flat and maybe, just maybe, you should play this bit as quietly as possible." And then, without missing a note, he returned his attention to the piano and to the singers on the stage, and we barreled on to the end.

I know that many of you can share stories like this one, but what you notice is how all of this was done in a way that was based on respect and working together to produce something that audiences loved and that we could be proud of—not as individuals, but as a community. As a Historian, I am wary of nostalgia, but, God, those were wonderful times.

And now, Steve, you've brought us together as a community one more time. A community that shares your love of music and admires all you did for so many years at the College—but mostly as a community that is drawn together today by its admiration and love for you.