

Remembering McNairy County's Music Man

By Dr. Shawn Pitts

Special to the Independent Appeal

McNairy County lost a legend last week. I don't use those words lightly. Legendary status is conferred on so very few of us as we pass through this life but if Frank Congiardo doesn't make the grade, I don't know anyone who will. Even before death finally took him (dancing with death had become commonplace for Frank over the years) he was a monumental figure in the lives of at least two generations of music students who came through McNairy County schools. At Selmer High School, McNairy Central and later at Adamsville Jr., Sr. High, Frank fashioned, note by note, student by student, a legacy of excellence in the band programs at those schools. At Adamsville, where I was lucky enough to be associated with him, he built a complete band program from the ground up with nothing more than a love of music, grit and sheer determination, all of which he possessed in great abundance.

Musical excellence is a tradition that continues in this county till this very day. Not long ago, I was privy to a conversation in which an East Tennessean was trying to get a bead on where, exactly, in the state one might

find our fair county when the man suddenly remarked, "Oh, McNairy County! I know where that is. You have those great marching bands!" This is certainly a testament to the hard work and dedication of the current music educators, staff and students at our high schools but I think they would be the first to admit that a reputation such as this is not cultivated overnight. Everything solid, even a reputation, has a foundation and in McNairy County Frank Congiardo is the cornerstone of our, concert stage, marching field and parade route. Long before the trophies and other accolades came, Frank was teaching the sons and daughters of factory workers and farmers the finer points of music and in the process enriching their lives and broadening their horizons even, I believe, beyond his own comprehension. Modest as he was, Frank would never acknowledge the profound impact he and his family have made on this community but it is seen and felt, none the less, everyday in the lives of those they have influenced.

I, like countless others, was one of his band kids. As a drummer (we didn't know we were percussionists in those days) Frank taught me that you can find a pocket "just behind the beat" which makes Blues and some kinds of Jazz sound and feel just

right. On too many occasions, he caught me dragging instead of playing in that pocket but he had the patience to point out the difference even if he did so at the top of his lungs. He gave me my first taste of Buddy Rich, first on recordings and then later when he took a group of us to see the legendary drummer when he made a rare appearance in Jackson. The other musical insights he shared with me and others are too numerous to mention. Even now, almost thirty years after I first met him, it is his voice that I hear when I try to give what aid I can to some young musician who asks for my advice; it is his agitated and deadly accurate baton waving that guides me, in my mind's eye, through difficult musical passages. I think I will never really be without him.

With Frank, it was always first and foremost about the music but there was something else too. I've known many gifted musicians in my life as well as many fine teachers, leaders and motivators but "Mr. C," as so many of us lovingly called him, was all of these, rolled into one gruff package. He was unapologetically hard on his students, especially those whom he entrusted with some level of responsibility. He asked more than you thought you could

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Mr. C

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give and pushed you farther than you thought you could go. At the end of the day, he almost always got what he wanted out of people and his students learned valuable lessons that improved their musical and leadership skills. He just, somehow, knew you had it in you even before you did. In Frank's band you worked your tail off, that was a given, and not for the trophies, not for the honors, not for the grade, but for Frank. He would never ask you to give more than he was willing to give himself. If you gave one hundred percent, he gave one hundred twenty. I've seen him sit in the shade and drill a band from a straight chair when he was too ill to stand. That's not an exaggeration. He wasn't one to freely hand out undeserved compliments and lavish praise on half hearted efforts. He always called it what it was. When the affirmation came, if it ever did, you felt you had truly accomplished something but most of all there was a kind of warmth in knowing that you had pleased, if not impressed, Mr. C. To inspire people, especially young people, to persevere and grasp for their highest potential in this way is the rarest of gifts and one that he gave without a second thought.

I learned the passion and drive to bring music and art into the lives of others from Frank Congiardo and I can honestly say without him, there would be no Arts in McNairy. In fact, I came to regard our feeble attempts to start an arts council as a success only when Frank called me over after a concert in the park just to tell me that he enjoyed the show, adding that what we were doing was, in his estimation, well worth while and I should "keep it up." He also made a generous financial contribution to the organization. It was his way of saying he was proud of me. I'll never forget how that made me feel and those few words from him are still part of my motivation for "keeping it up." I will always count it an honor and privilege to be among the last people to play music with Frank. He had always supported AiM's community band efforts and played alto for us in



Photo Submitted

The Jackson Area Community Jazz Band, under the direction of Gerald McGuire. The sax section, from left to right: Ralph (Dr. Sax) Thomas (standing), Frank Congiardo, director Gerald McGuire, Alan Murray and Mike Congiardo.

the last Christmas concert. He was planning to play in the July 4th concert and help out with the orchestra for the Sound of Music when he found out that he was sick again. The last time I talked with him, he apologized to me like he thought he should have been able to follow through with his commitments if you can imagine that.

Frank also inspired a great many students to follow in his footsteps as musicians and music educators including his two talented sons who carry on his legacy in a way that I know, from first hand conversations, made him very proud. Mrs. Pat, his boys and their families were Frank's greatest accomplishment. He didn't talk that way but you just always knew it was true. You could see it in the way he would light up when he talked about his kids and grandkids. He had good reason to be proud of his family and I am thankful to them for sharing Frank with all of us. To countless students, colleagues, neighbors and friends, he was a mentor in both music and life and it is with great heaviness of heart that we mark his passing. Still, my

deepest regret is that he was taken from his family too soon. They will miss him in a way that the rest of us can not. I know people say this all the time but in this case the truth of it is so apparent that I will risk the cliché: there will never be another.

Frank would absolutely hate that I wrote all this down. He never wanted anyone to make a fuss and sappy sentimentalism wasn't his style. When he was sick, which was far too often, and even in death he didn't want anyone calling attention to him. He never complained for the same reasons. I went to see him once, years ago, when kidney disease almost robbed him of his life and he acted embarrassed that I came, as if he just had a bad cold and I could, surely, find better ways to spend my time. That's just how he was. But it is not really for Frank that I say all these things after all. It is for all of those who knew and loved him as I did. We all (you know who you are) have our own memories of the man, our own stories to tell and I hope you will share them with someone. Over the last few days, I have heard a good many of those tales affectionately

recounted with a wavering voice and a tear in the eye but always with a laugh and a smile at the end. I think that's fitting. Frank loved a funny story and inspired more than a few.

I said he was a legend and legends, as the saying goes, never really die. For many years, yet to come, wherever top quality band programs, inspiring music educators and first rate musicians are discussed in West Tennessee, Frank's name will be at the top of the list. For those of us who knew him, however, the legend is somehow much more personal. My life, I truly believe, would have been a very different one had I not known him and I suspect that I am not alone in this. The people that Frank touched must number in the thousands and each one will, I believe, echo my sentiments. The things he taught us about music, perseverance, hard work, commitment and leadership remain and, of course, the memories linger. And so the legend lives on but the man will never be replaced. God bless you Frank. We miss you already.

Farewell Mr. C

By Alan Murray

What can you say about a man who has influenced the lives of so many? I can thank Mark Massey for my experience in Mr. C.'s band at Adamsville. Mr. Massey came to me during basketball practice one day and pulled me aside. He said "You know, you don't have much of a future in basketball. Have you thought about playing in the band?" Well, yes, I had thought about playing in the band, and did play in the band during my 5th grade year. I didn't last long, mainly because it just wasn't fun. Also, I was playing trumpet then, but what I really wanted to play was the saxophone, which I was sure would be too expensive for my parents to buy.

But now, in the 8th grade, I had heard from friends who were in the band that this director was good. I also heard that he was a saxophone player himself. So, with a more optimistic outlook, I agreed to give band a try once more.

Soon learned that Mr. Congiardo (Mr. C., as he told us to call him) was one of those rare teachers who was so much fun in class that you didn't realize how much you were learning. In a short two years, he single-handedly turned the Adamsville Jr./Sr. High School band into a group that you could be proud to be in.

It wasn't long after Mr. C. came to Adamsville that his son, Mike, followed. We soon became close friends, and there was seldom a day when we weren't out fishing, hunting, or hanging out in the arcade. We spent several nights in the Congiardo basement listening to old record albums while a heated game of canasta raged overhead. A few years later, I got to know Mr. C.'s other son, Frankie. We spent a



lot of time wearing out the grass at the golf course in Adamsville.

After high school, I eventually ended up working at Wallick Music Co. in Jackson and crossed paths once again with Mr. C., who taught private lessons at the store in his spare time. I even took a few lessons from him at that time, and although I never really got my playing to where I wanted it, I had a lot of fun. At Wallick's, I also got to know Mr. C.'s brother, Dominic. Dominic was semi-retired from playing sax professionally and went to work with me part-time in the repair shop at Wallick's. Like Mr. C., Dominic was always there with a smile, even later when his health was poor.

Mr. C., Mike and I ended up playing together in the Jackson Area Community Jazz Band under the direction of Todd Hill and later Gerald McGuire, the store manager at Wallick's and another good friend. I'll always remember those gigs and rehearsals as some of the most fun and rewarding experiences I've had in my life.

Mr. C., I hate saying farewell, but I have a lifetime of memories that I'll never forget or grow tired of, whether it was with a saxophone or a fishing rod in my hand. I'm glad that you and your wonderful family were (and still are) a part of my life.

"Mr 'C' was more than just a mentor to me, he was in many ways a surrogate father to so many of us - our home away from home at school. He was more than just my teacher - he was the one guy whose approval musically meant more to me than any other. I was his student - his fellow band member - he played saxophone with me in a small group in clubs in the Jackson area. The grandest day of my musical life was when he recommended me for the Milan Band Director's job - and when I would play a solo on saxophone and he would turn to me with a grin. That was when I finally knew that I had arrived musically. There will be no one to replace him - but I think he would only ask that we as musicians and educators continue to give the gift that he gave us."-Former student Keith Brown

"I cannot describe the sense of loss I have felt since Frank Congiardo passed away. Next to my father, no other man has made such an impact on my life. 'Mr. C' was not just a teacher of music; but a man who molded thousands of lives. He was bigger than life, had a heart of gold, instilled a solid work ethic and expected excellence from his students and those who worked for him. 'Mr. C' of McNairy County has physically left us but his love and his spirit will live on. We will greatly miss him"-Former student Ronnie Brooks.

