

Life

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J.B. Vander Ark's GREATEST HITS



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

J.B. "Van" Vander Ark has retired from retirement once before in his life. How do we know he won't do it again? "We don't," he said.

The longtime conductor is leaving the Prime Time Band on a high note

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NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

When the Prime Time Band puts on its 10th Anniversary Concert on Sunday, the audience will, no doubt, hear all kinds of interesting sounds.

Sniffing may be one of them.

"On the last piece, I think there will be some tears," admitted conductor J.B. "Van" Vander Ark.

That's because it will be his final performance with the seniors-only band. After leading them for almost a decade, the 71-year-old is retiring his baton. He informed the group about the decision earlier this year.

"It was such a difficult evening," recalled Mr. Vander Ark, sitting before practice inside his office off the music room at La Colina Junior High. "These are my kids. My adult kids."

It's easy to see why he thinks of them that way. Mr. Vander Ark, a band teacher for 35 years at the school, was just a couple of years into his retirement when he was approached with the idea of starting the band. It wasn't long before he realized that it wasn't much different than what he had been doing before. He had to take a bunch of inexperienced students and teach them how to play in the same room that he had used throughout his career. Some practiced, some didn't. Others forgot their music. And some, like Silvio Di Loreto proved on a recent day, were nearly always tardy.

It was 6:30 p.m. on a Tuesday—the day they typically practice. Most of the band was already warming up. But there was no sign of Mr. Di Loreto, 79.

"He often comes about a minute before," said Mr. Vander Ark, lowering his head and looking sternly through his wire-framed glasses. One had to wonder if it was "the look" Mr. Di Loreto said he has come to know so well.

Eight minutes passed.

"As you can see," said Mr. Vander Ark, "the chairs are filling up."

So, Mr. Di Loreto's here?

"Nope, it's too early for him."

With just one minute to spare, Mr. Di Loreto finally walked through the door, clarinet in hand.

"OK, let's start," said Mr. Vander Ark. He stood at the front of the room as he had all those years before



What will Mr. Vander Ark remember most about his career with the Prime Time Band? "The people."



holding his baton in his right hand, which trembled slightly.

It was precisely 6:45 p.m.

It's that kind of discipline that Mr. Di Loreto said he will miss most.

"He's not happy unless he begins practice at 6:45 p.m.," explained the Santa Barbara businessman. "We used to meet from 7 to 9 p.m., but now we meet from 6:45 to 9 p.m. He snuck that in."

As the band launched into their first song for the upcoming concert, one could tell the extra practice has paid off. But they didn't always sound

that way. When the band first formed, 13 of the 33 members had never played an instrument. Mr. Vander Ark recalled their first rehearsal when they attempted "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

"We were like in five different keys at the same time," he said. "When you see the expressions on their faces, they didn't know if they should laugh or cry. I had to sit down because I was laughing so hard."

Carol Anderson didn't have to worry about sounding bad. She couldn't get a sound out of her flute at

all when she first started. Although she played piano and the mellophone as a kid, she decided to take on the flute when she joined the Prime Time Band. She originally went with her then 83-year-old mother, Mrs. Anderson's husband, Roger, came along just to drive them, but ended up staying himself.

"Some of us hadn't had a chance to play music since we left school," said Mrs. Anderson, 70, of Carpinteria. "Some of us put our instruments

CONCERT

The Prime Time Band's 10th Anniversary Concert will be held at 3 p.m. Sunday at the San Marcos High School Auditorium, 4750 Hollister Ave. in Santa Barbara. Refreshments will be served following the concert. Admission is free. For more information about joining the Prime Time Band, call band manager Kathy Bartkowiak at 964-6587 or go to www.ptband.org.

Mr. Vander Ark's advice to his successor? "Patience," he said.

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Band strikes a chord with seniors

MUSIC

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away for 50 years."

She still remembers Prime Time Band's first concert.

"We were all so nervous because most of us hadn't performed musically in public before. We laugh to this day about how tensed up people were," she said. "Some people even talked about taking tranquilizers just so they could get through it."

Since then, the Prime Time Band has performed more than 100 concerts. Mr. Vander Ark was originally approached with the idea by George Pendergast, whose son he had once taught and later became a drummer in the band Dishwalla. Mr. Pendergast had heard about the New Horizons program back east where bands were being formed for those 50 and older and figured one might be popular here. There are now more than 100 such bands in the United States and Canada.

"He spent all this money on drums and lessons for his son," said Mr. Vander Ark. "It was his turn."

Originally, there were 33 members under Mr. Vander Ark's leadership — now there are 85. They take up the whole band room at La Colina Junior High. But these students, unlike the others who use the space, don't share music stands — being near-sighted or far-sighted makes that difficult. In fact, Mr. Vander Ark uses a microphone since many of them are hard of hearing. There are times, though, when more of them probably wish they were.

"He likes to tell a lot of blonde jokes," said Mrs. Anderson, a bottled blonde, with a laugh.

This night's practice was no exception.

"We have, for a change, two blonde jokes," announced Mr. Vander Ark during a break.

"Big change!" groaned a blond flute player in the front row.

He launched into it: A blonde asks her boyfriend to help her with a jigsaw puzzle. He picks up the box and



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*"It has been
the most rewarding
experience of my life."*

J.B. "Van" Vander Ark,
retiring conductor of
the Prime Time Band

tells her there's no way they are going to be able to put it back together to make it look like the tiger on the box.

"Then the boyfriend says, 'Now let's put all the Frosted Flakes back in the box,'" said Mr. Vander Ark.

All of a sudden, several band members held up signs with different numbers on them: six, nine, four, eight. They actually rate his jokes.

But the blond flute player in the front row shot up her hand instead.

"I don't get it! I don't get it!" she said playfully.

Jeff Peterson, who is taking over as conductor, says he will probably continue the joke-telling tradition. So is he any good at it?

"No," he said, "but they politely laugh anyway."

Up until now, Mr. Peterson, a music teacher at Goleta Valley Junior High School, also has been serving as the conductor of the Prime Time Silver

Band, which is for beginning seniors. He also has filled in for Mr. Vander Ark when needed. He was asked to take on the position permanently when Mr. Vander Ark decided he wanted to retire to spend more time with his family and pursue other interests, like travelling. Truth be told, that's probably the only way he would get to be in the Prime Time Band.

At 49, Mr. Peterson isn't even old enough to join.

But, he points out, by the time he becomes conductor in January, he can. Members have to turn at least 50 the year that they join.

"He's so much younger than we are, we like to tease him about the music that he doesn't recognize," admitted Mrs. Anderson. "There's some songs, for example, from World War II we were playing. He didn't even remember hearing any of them."

Does that mean Mr. Peterson, who plays electric bass in the house band at The James Joyce on Friday nights, will be changing the kind of tunes they play? Say, from sock-hop to hip-hop?

"I don't think so," he said with a laugh. "There's not too much heavy metal written for concert band, I got to tell you. I have no interest in rap. Hip-hop doesn't do much for me."

He realizes, though, that while the music and format won't change much, there will still be an adjustment.

"We really can't replace Van. We'll have another conductor. He's substituted for Van and we like him real well," said Lee Schmedes, 78, of Goleta, who has been playing trombone in the band since the beginning. "But there's no replacing him."

The feeling, it would seem, is mutual.

When Mr. Vander Ark was asked what song best represents his time with the Prime Time Band, he didn't hesitate.

"It's a song we can't even play in our last concert because it would be too emotional," he said.

"'Friends.'"