

Hunter Sparling:

Hello everybody and welcome back to the I Am WT Podcast. I'm your host Hunter Sparling.

Brooke Nemeth:

And I'm Brooke Nemeth.

Hunter Sparling:

Today we are joined by Dr. BJ Brooks, the director of The School of Music. Dr. Brooks, do you mind introducing yourself and telling us a little bit about yourself?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Sure. I'm BJ Brooks. I came to WT in 2008 as a professor in composition, and my field of study was theory, music theory, and I did that for about a decade before getting involved with the graduate studies program in The School of Music. And then after 2020 Dr. Teweleit decided to pass the reins of the Buffalo Marching Band to me. And then last year was my first year as the director of The School of Music.

Hunter Sparling:

All right. Do you mind telling us where you grew up?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Sure. Yeah. I grew up in Eastern New Mexico in Portales, which is just about an hour and 45 minutes from here. My Bachelor's of Music I did earn that at Eastern New Mexico. And then my wife was in the cast of Texas in 1998, '97, '98 around then and met Dr. Robert Hanson as he was one of the people who was organizing the event at the time and fell in love with WT. And so when I got my first job, which was a band director in Hereford, we decided to, she completed her degree at WT and then I received my master's from WT and after that, traveled around a little bit and decided to get my doctorate. And I did that at Texas Tech. So there's this little Bermuda Triangle, the four year universities on the high Plains of Eastern New Mexico and West Texas. And I am lucky enough to have participated in all three, and the best of which we all know is WT.

Brooke Nemeth:

Of course we do know that. What was your career path when you were growing up? What did you want to do?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Well, that's an interesting one. I always knew that music was going to be important, and when I was in junior high, I loved the band director. That seemed like a really neat job. And I was reflecting on this a few weeks ago with someone. I found my old high school newspaper from our senior year and it says, "Where will you be in 15 years," or something like that. And I had answered, "I'll be a college professor," and I don't know where that came from, but I suppose that was going to be the career path and it seemed to have worked out.

Brooke Nemeth:

You mentioned your wife was part of the Texas musical back in the late '90s. Was there anything else that got you into WT?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

No, not really. Hereford we were little, we had two little kids at the time, so we didn't do a whole lot of traveling. Stayed in Hereford quite a bit and we still had ties in New Mexico. We were still traveling there on Sundays. I was the organist and she was the pianist at a church in Clovis. And so we did that for years and so we had a westerly direction more so than coming up to Canyon or even Amarillo. And so I didn't get that connection until I met the faculty of The School of Music and started getting my master's degree. But once that happened, really did fall in love with the university and the passion that the professors had then and still do have.

Brooke Nemeth:

Yeah, it's definitely a whole different feel at WT compared to other universities as in a way of community and how the professors really do care. Can you tell us some more about some of your hobbies?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Hobbies, yeah. So I tend to define a hobby as something that I wouldn't really want to get paid for. Once you start getting paid for something that's not really a hobby and something where I don't have to worry about other people's opinions on things, that's a good hobby. I do woodworking and my parents were into building houses and that sort of thing. And so I do house things. I build, I like to paint and design house stuff around where I'm at. We live on 10 acres, and so taking care of that land is a hobby as well.

Brooke Nemeth:

Sure. That's a task in itself.

Dr. BJ Brooks:

It's a lot of fun, yeah.

Hunter Sparling:

Last semester I did a project in one of my classes where we recorded Canyon's high school band. Are you involved with high school bands around here? Because I know they spoke highly of the music school here, which was one of the reasons we got to go out there and record them. Do you work closely with them, mentor the students?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Yeah, I have some connection with a lot of the bands around. So in the fall we call it marching season, The halftime shows they're competitive halftime shows, especially in Texas and it's a part of most every band is going to work to a certain degree, so that way when they're go to a competition, they can get a high placement. I do a lot of designing on that. I'll do writing the music of shows and I'll do the drill design. That's the shapes on the field. And so I do that for a number of high schools around here. And a couple of years ago I was working with about 20 of them in one year, which is probably too many. And this year I've cut it back to about 15, but they range from, of course, Canyon High School and schools around here to as far south as El Paso and back east to Wichita Falls and that sort of area. And it's into New Mexico as well with some people that I've known for most of my life at this point.

Hunter Sparling:

So you're getting kids from all of over.

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Oh yeah. And so part of the whole idea of me being able to do work with these marching bands is that I can go and visit and tell them about WT at the same time. So there's a recruiting opportunity that I wouldn't want to pass up, and it's give them a little bit of flavor of WT and spread the word so that way maybe they could either come visit the place or join us for our activities like band camp in the summer or something like that.

Hunter Sparling:

So you mentioned you were in charge of making the shapes on the field. When I watch marching bands and I've seen them go into their formations and all that, I've always wondered how they decided to do these forms. I mean, when they come together, it's crazy cool. How do you decide what shapes and what forms you want to do?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Well, you listen to the music and if the music's really energetic, well then we're trying to do a lot more fast-paced motion, and we use contrary motion quite a bit to make it look like they're moving faster than they are. For example, in the WT Show this year one of the tunes is Wipe Out. We're doing this move that if they don't execute it correctly, there would be a wipe out on the field. And that's quite exciting. And so maybe that will end up being more exciting than we had anticipated, but the music dictates what the forms are, and if the trumpets have a big melody, well, they need to be close to the front and center so that way they can be staged nicely.

So listening to music and then also noticing what's the state of the art across in the world of drum corps and Bands of America competitions, the style has changed. What bands were doing 50 years ago is different than what they were doing 30 years ago, which is different than what they are doing now. And so staying somewhat contemporary with the design is important, but also making it entertaining for the crowd.

Brooke Nemeth:

Yeah, I know marching band is a big deal in this part of Texas. I was in marching band back in high school, and I know it was highly competitive and it was always a really good time, and we loved going to competition, and I miss those days really. You said you were the director of The School of Music. How long have you been in that position and how has that transition been for you?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Well, let's see. This is almost September. I started in August of last year, so one year and one month. And the transition has gone really well. My predecessor Dr. Robert Hanson retired at the end of last year. So we had a year where he had taken a step back but was still teaching courses. So that way if there were any questions that I ever had, he was always able there to be there to help and give me some direction and well, there's no manual for department heads, and so there's a lot of mysterious things that go on. And having some people around that can help answer those questions is really beneficial.

Hunter Sparling:

So with The School of Music, what ways would you say it's grown and changed over the years? Has it evolved and advanced more, going more into the future?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Absolutely. Absolutely. 20 years ago, it wasn't The School of Music, it was the Department of Music. And so one of the indicators of change is that name change, and it's more than just a name change. It has

to do with what we do as an entity and how our professors and faculty as a unit work together. And it's kind of a branding thing too. So it's a large program. We'll have anywhere between 250 and 300 majors in The School of Music. And the big difference as we move from the past into the future, some of our offerings change as time goes on.

One of our newest offerings is music technology, and so this is something that didn't really exist 30, 40 years ago. Dr. Ingebrigtsen heads up the music technology and he'll do performances that will do motion capture and that sort of thing and translate that into musical sounds, which is really interesting. But it allows the students to know that music is more than just an acoustic phenomena. We have a digital realm, and those avenues open up more through time. We have students in junior high and even earlier than that who are already adept at making music digitally and the resources that they have, it's really amazing at this point. And so we have people coming in with a certain background and a depth of knowledge that exceeds certainly on the technological level, exceeds what has happened in the past.

And so The School of Music is able to move with the times so that way we can cater to those different avenues of performance and different performance medium.

Hunter Sparling:

What are you most proud of during your time here?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

What makes me proud is when the faculty have achievements and the students have achievements, and the student achievement is a result of excellent faculty direction. And so we have had students of, just this last year, we had a group of opera students perform in New York for an invited event. We've had the choir and the orchestra did a tour to Costa Rica, which is a wonderful event. The band recently performed at TMEA, they performed. They've had the most number as an invited event. It's the highest level of event for college bands in Texas. They have the most number of invitations from that, from any university regardless of the size. And also this year, the choir performed at the same event. So those events and invitations for our performing ensembles are just top level.

And so there's a sense of pride there, not just for me, but from all of the faculty that our students are doing amazing things, and of course, that's at the direction of an amazing faculty, and so we give them all of the credit for being able to put all the forces together to have students achieving at the highest level.

Hunter Sparling:

Awesome. Well, Dr. Brooks, I think we're going to go on break real quick and then we're going to come back and we're going to ask you a few more questions, all right. Once again, my name is Hunter Sparling.

Brooke Nemeth:

And I'm Brooke, and we'll be right back.

Speaker 4:

Donors to West Texas A&M University give more than their material support. They devote time, expertise, and commitment. WT would not be what it is today without individuals dedicated to our forward progress.

Brooke Nemeth:

Welcome back to the I Am WT Podcast. We are here with Dr. BJ Brooks, the director of The School of Music.

Hunter Sparling:

So we would love to hear more about the efforts to raise funds for the vocal endowment. What does that project entail and what would that mean for students?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

So we have a lot of different fronts for raising money. Vocal endowment is one of several. For an example, we had Dr. Biffle, longtime area musician, choral director, a high school choir director in Amarillo, and then later he was the choir director here at WT. Once he passed away, there was an effort from alumni and family to create a vocal endowment. And so this is a type of scholarship that once it's endowed, it creates continuation of funds for scholarships. That's one area. There's another vocal endowment from another patron that is interested in just creating a placeholder, so that way students can be funded for coming to WT. So there are a number of different scholarships, and in the past we've had generous donors that have been able to provide us with the funding to create these endowments that are perpetual and really support our efforts to attract top notch musicians.

In this day and age, it's vital that WT has a method to reach out and we will say entice students to come to WT. It's not unusual that a student, especially a student that may have made Allstate, has some terrific skills, could be approached by many universities to come to their program and not just in the vocal area, but also in instrumental. And so it's essential that WT competes in that marketplace. And so without having an endowment, without having the scholarships, it would be very hard to get students to come from where they are across the United States or across the world to come to WT without getting that word out. Part of that mission is find where the students are, and once we do that, they can hear WT from a lot of different places. You can get to hear us on YouTube, you hear it on Facebook, that sort of thing.

And then they find out that yes, WT has a lot to offer, and so then there's got to be some sort of audition, a scholarship audition, and we have to follow that up with some sort of offer for those students. WT has the benefit of being a very affordable university, especially compared with other public universities and certainly private universities. Now costs in higher education have risen over the past few decades, and so our efforts to help the students in their willingness to come to university, it's important for us to follow up with these types of endowments and scholarships.

Hunter Sparling:

Absolutely, absolutely. So we have another exciting season of marching bands coming up for the football games, and I've always said that the band performances are always one of my favorite parts of football games, whether it be halftime or when they're performing on the side it's always, I like to try and figure out what song they're playing. What can you tell us about the halftime performance without spoiling anything?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Oh, well, there's no spoilers, but this is an interesting one. We realized in 2019 or 2020 around there that the band has been around at WT since 1917, and somewhere along there we missed the chance to do a hundred year anniversary show, and so we're going to do that, but we're going to call it the 107 year anniversary show because 107 years only comes around once. Part of that celebration is a look back. We opened our musical vault and we're choosing, I think what the best tune from each decade was. So we'll have something from the '20s, 1920s, the '30s, '40s, '50s. I had mentioned before that Wipe Out's one of those tunes. Of course, there's also Sing, sing, sing is a good one. The theme from Rocky, everybody will recognize that.

Hunter Sparling:

Oh, absolutely.

Dr. BJ Brooks:

All the way to modern times, Despacito. We'll do that one as well. And so it's kind of a best of collection. We'll do a little bit of a lot of tunes and a couple of them we'll spend a little bit more time on and give the audience some just fantastic performances. You can look forward to hearing a really fantastic trumpet section with some soloists that are going to be showcased in a unique way and some other nice surprises along the way.

Hunter Sparling:

I'm excited to hear it. I am just ready for it to get started.

Brooke Nemeth:

Right. That sounds like something we don't want to miss. What's your personal favorite decade?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

The '80s and '90s have a lot of really great music, but really the best, I think the best band music as far as marching band probably came from the '70s. There's just some really stellar pieces. I only chose one, so we'll have to wait and see what that one was.

Brooke Nemeth:

Okay. I'm excited to know.

Hunter Sparling:

I am too. What advice would you give students today?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

The advice I would have for students is to get connected. We come in from all of these different places, and what I've noticed is more and more students are drawn to their social presence or their, I'll just say their phones. We walk around and we're tied to people digitally, and we're tied to spending time just on our phone or in some digital place. And we have an opportunity when we come to the university to meet people that you certainly haven't seen before and have never met before. And if you don't allow yourself the opportunity to engage with them physically, then you're missing out.

This is part of the whole university experience, and so my advice is to unplug and get connected. Certainly The School of Music has a lot of wonderful programs that we can do that you can audition for the choir, you can audition for the band, you could be in the drum line, you could do a lot of different things. And there are other organizations across the university that are there just for that. And I think the more connected we are, the better off you're going to be and the better the experience at WT.

Brooke Nemeth:

I think that's great advice. Yesterday in one of my classes, we actually sat down and weren't on our phones, and we were actually making conversation. We all pass each other every day in the hallways, but yesterday was the first time we actually sat there and had a conversation instead of sitting on our phones, which is pretty cool. What is one of your favorite memories of your time here at WT?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

There's a lot of great memories, and that's a tough one. Maybe probably one of my favorite times was my first year doing the marching band. The students really made it easy for me to do that sort of thing, so I

have a fond memory there. That's not that long ago though. I write a lot of music, and so I've had a number of ensembles perform my music. Hearing each of those types is special as well, and both my son and daughter came to WT, and so maybe that's it. Maybe having both of them in the same class at the same time. That's something that I had looked forward to since they were little. I never knew when it was going to happen. First I thought when I was a band director, at some point I'll have them in my band, and then later I became a professor. Well, someday I might have them in my class, and I got to do all of that. They were in my classes and they were also in the band with me, and I thought that that's really pretty special. And so that's probably my best memory.

Brooke Nemeth:

What do they play in the band?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Well, both of them at one point had been drum major of the marching band, but in the symphonic band, they were bassoon. My daughter plays the bassoon and my son plays the oboe.

Hunter Sparling:

So being in The School of Music's events such as opera, other sort of ensembles, do you have to be a music student to be involved in those activities?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Absolutely not. In fact, we have some special incentive for non-majors. So one of those is we have zero credit classes, and for both band, orchestra and choir, there are zero credit options, so that way we don't have to worry about extra fees and that sort of thing for those courses. And so I think that's really helpful. We typically have about 40 or 50 non-majors in the marching band. I think it would be great to have a hundred of them, and sometimes getting that word out is difficult as people are coming in during the summer, there's a lot of other distractions, but the best advertisement are the students themselves. So yes, non-majors are absolutely welcome. We've had some very fine performers who were non-majors. I think it helps the group also, helps round us out because if you're performing your instrument and it's going to be your vocation, that's one thing and that's a great thing.

It's also great to have people who loved playing their instrument or loved singing in high school and junior high, and then they want to continue that for the rest of their lives. That's possible. We certainly want to encourage that. On Monday nights, we have a town and gown band that's directed by Dr. Gary Garner, who retired about 20 years ago, and he's been doing this town and gown band. This is a community ensemble, and so another example of a place for people to come and join together in music, and you certainly don't have to be a major to do that.

Hunter Sparling:

So each and every one of those groups is just, it's a mix of everybody.

Dr. BJ Brooks:

It is a mix.

Hunter Sparling:

I think that's great. You're getting backgrounds. You could have education majors.

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Absolutely.

Hunter Sparling:

Science majors. I feel like that's just a great thing to have.

Dr. BJ Brooks:

It is, and if you look at even professional performing groups such as the Amarillo Symphony, there's a large percentage of them that are not music majors per se. They're doctors, lawyers, and that sort of thing. And so music can be a lifelong pursuit.

Brooke Nemeth:

What does WT mean to you?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

WT is a place where the faculty care deeply about the students and student success. WT is a place where students can come and they know they're going to be taken care of, and they're going to learn in a top-notch facility by top-notch teachers, from faculty to staff all the way around. There's a level of passion that I don't see when I visit other places, other places are more like a machine, and WT seems to be more about people. That's what WT means to me, it's about the people.

Brooke Nemeth:

I wholeheartedly agree with that. WT has been such a great place for me personally, and I'm sure a lot of other students can say that as well.

Hunter Sparling:

Do you have anything else you'd like to explain?

Dr. BJ Brooks:

Yeah, sure. At the end of the spring semester, we're going to have a showcase of music, which is going to have all of our performing ensembles in one place. That'll be at the Amarillo Civic Center, and we'll have more information as we get closer to that, but that's going to be a really big deal, and we want to invite as many people as possible to see what The School of Music has to offer.

Hunter Sparling:

Well, I might have to attend. I just love the band here.

Brooke Nemeth:

Right. We would like to thank you for being on the I Am WT Podcast today, Dr. BJ Brooks. As y'all know, y'all can visit our podcast at wtamu.edu/podcasts and we will see you next week.