

*On April 29, 2023, faculty, students and alumni gathered for an evening of music and reflection to celebrate the 53-year tradition of the music program at Grande Prairie Regional College following the announcement that the music program at the facility, now known as Northwestern Polytechnic, was being suspended. I was given the chance to say a few words about my time at GPRC and how the music program influenced my life. This is what I chose to say:*

## GPRC Memories

Joan Blench

I was a student at Grande Prairie Regional College in the early 1980s. No big lecture halls or dorm rooms for this girl! Back then, the area west of 108 Street/Hwy 43 was just farmers' fields. The college was the original building designed by Douglas Cardinal which boasted not a single 90 degree angle.

I could have gone anywhere or been accepted into any field but I chose to start a Bachelor of Commerce degree at GPRC because a job as an accountant seemed like a good idea. In my first year, I had to take a general arts class. I chose "Western Civilization and the Arts" taught by Paul Rathke and Joy Bell.

Have you ever had an "ah-ha!" moment when things just seem to come together? That's what this class was. I had taken piano lessons all through school but my teachers had never given me more than a few cursory facts about composers to memorize the week before my exams. Now I was in a Tuesday/Thursday 8 am class with the lights dimmed for a slideshow (yes, I nodded off more than a few times) where the history of philosophy, art, architecture and music all came together as a unified whole. Amazing!

Just before midterms in my second year of the B. Comm program I came to the conclusion that I did NOT like organizational theory, economics, or accounting. I wanted more of the Arts. We didn't have a band at my school in Peace River so I took up the clarinet. Why not? Two lessons later and Mary Brown invited me to join the College & Community Wind Ensemble. Lest you think I was some sort of prodigy, I most certainly was not. But GPRC was a small school and that offered opportunities I would never have had in the big city.

I never intended to become a music teacher, but that's what happened. I joined the Alberta Piano Teachers Association in 1993. Through APTA, I learned of the Classical Music Festival in Eisenstadt, Austria and was able to sit in the very same spot and sing the exact same notes in the very church where Beethoven's Mass in C major premiered in 1807. Backstage at the Esterhazy palace, I walked on the exact same floorboards which Haydn had had installed more than two centuries ago. To say that was a life-changing experience would be an understatement. I get positively giddy when I talk music history with my piano students.

I have taught hundreds of children and adults over the past forty years, three of whom I know went on to make music their career. It's humbling to think that I may have made a difference in many lives.

A piano teacher does not make a lot of money. Had I followed the path to be a chartered accountant, I would likely be a wealthy woman today. But I have no doubt when I say that, thanks to my start in the music program at Grande Prairie Regional College, I am far, far richer.