

Gil Gleason, our conductor of the Oakland Community Orchestra for 50 years, died January 28, 2021. He led the orchestra from a handful of players to a full orchestra with all sections filled out. Additionally, he built the orchestra's library, chose our repertoire and led us tirelessly in rehearsals that culminated in performances for senior centers and elementary schools.

In 2014 the orchestra celebrated his retirement with a gala concert held at the Malonga Center.



selections from Beethoven, Corelli and Dvorak

May 9, 2014 at 1:00 PM

free admission

Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts
1428 Alice Street, Oakland

*The Oakland Community Orchestra
is proud to recognize conductor Gil Gleason
and celebrate the 50 years he has led the orchestra.*

Please join us.

RSVP to 5020concerts@gmail.com



There were two lengthy tributes to Gil in local newspapers; these follow.

What an extraordinary life!

From the *East Bay Times*, written by Maggie Sharpe, April 16, 2014

Oakland Community Orchestra to celebrate 50 years of music

OAKLAND — Oakland Community Orchestra conductor Gil Gleason wasn't letting anything slip by at a recent Friday morning rehearsal at Leona Lodge.

"It's a relaxed and recreational atmosphere, but I remind people that when we play, people are going to be listening to us," said Gleason, who has been conducting the orchestra for the past 50 years.

"He expects good music out of us," said Gleason's wife, Karen, who plays violin.

Gleason took over OCO, which is funded by the Oakland Department of Parks and Recreation, in 1964. At the time, there were about a dozen instrumentalists — today, the orchestra has 46 regular players who faithfully show up for Friday morning rehearsals. The orchestra also performs in the spring at retirement centers and in the fall at Oakland elementary schools.

"When I took over the orchestra, I'd never held a baton in my life," said Gleason, 81, who was a professional violinist with the Oakland Symphony for 35 years before retiring in 1999.

"Madi Bacon, who was the conductor of the San Francisco Boys Chorus for many years, gave me a bloated recommendation, and I fibbed a bit about my conducting experience."

A public performance and reception will be held at 1 p.m. May 9 at the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts in Oakland to celebrate the orchestra's 50th anniversary under Gleason's baton. Gleason was born in New Jersey and came to California in 1960.

He began playing the violin when he was 8 years old, but didn't turn professional until he was 31.

"I had no intention of being a professional musician, but I came to it because of my God-given talent and the encouragement of family and friends," said Gleason, who earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy in 1958 from Oberlin College in Ohio.

He said before he joined the Oakland Symphony, he was living "hand-to-mouth," making money from playing bridge and giving tennis and violin lessons.

In 1966, Oakland Parks and Recreation asked Gleason to form a second orchestra that would rehearse in the evenings, as working people couldn't make it to the Friday morning rehearsals.

The evening orchestra lasted for about seven years before it was dissolved because of conflicts with Gleason's symphony schedule.

Karen Gleason recalled clearly that the evening orchestra's first concert took place on April 1, 1966, at the Kaiser Center.

"I know the date because that was the night that Gil proposed to me," said Karen Gleason. The couple married in the fall of that year. They have three children and five grandchildren.

OCO is a nonaudition orchestra, meaning anyone can join. "Anyone can join who doesn't make a mess of things," joked Gleason, who said he's got some "rough edges" and has ruffled a number of feathers over the years.

Karen Gleason said OCO is important to a lot of people in different ways. She said one elderly member told her it was his reason for living — the thing that kept him going.

Florence Wong, who plays cello, joined OCO a couple of months ago.

"I'm a pianist, but I wanted to play orchestral music, so I started learning the cello more than a year ago," Wong said.

"I love the music and the people — Gil is wonderful and has a great sense of humor.

Although I'm new, I feel welcome and not intimidated. The key is to do what you can — and don't do what you can't."

Betty Deruysscher has played the upright bass in the orchestra since her retirement 14 years ago.

"We try to make it work, sometimes we're not all together and sometimes we're pretty good," said Deruysscher, who enjoys the children's reactions when they play at local schools. "The kids are so enthusiastic — at Christmastime, they'll sing along to 'Jingle Bells' and sometimes send us thank-you letters."

"A couple of violinists reached their 100th birthday with us," Gleason said. "Concert mistress Priscilla Magee, who plays violin, and first clarinetist Phil Stephens are both in their 90s."

Gleason also earns a bit of money by "strolling" with his violin at local retirement and assisted living centers. That money goes directly to a nonprofit called the Friends of Ruwenzori Foundation, which he and his wife began in 2004 to combat HIV/AIDS in Uganda.

"To know Gil Gleason is to know a passion for music, generosity and a heart that seeks to bring a better life to people near and far," said OCO member Bennett Price.



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Hometown Hero: Gil Gleason gives a half-century to the Oakland Community Orchestra

*By Lou Fancher Correspondent Contra Costa Times
Posted: Mon May 12 18:24:55 MDT 2014*

InsideBayArea.com

ORINDA -- Viewing the first 30 years of Gil Gleason's life, it would be impossible to have predicted where he would be in 2014.

Growing up in 1940s New Jersey and learning to play violin, Gleason thought music was an occupation for a lady, not a suitable profession for a man. But on a recent day, seated near a grand piano and the floor-to-ceiling windowed walls of his Orinda home's spacious music salon, he was planning the playbill for a May 9 concert marking his half-century as conductor of the Oakland Community Orchestra.

The 81-year-old violinist, who retired from the Oakland East Bay Symphony in 1999 after 33 years, has taught violin and led the community orchestra for five decades.

Setting aside his violin after high school, Gleason's up-and-down college career, interrupted by a two-year stint in the Army, led to a philosophy degree from Oberlin College in Ohio and a bare-bones existence working on a Ford assembly line. He moved to California in 1960, teaching tennis, playing bridge and billiards for cash and being "mostly flat-out broke," Gleason said.

Seeking direction, he joined the St. Andrew Episcopal Church choir in San Bruno, commuting from North Berkeley to play violin. Encouraged by friends and family to audition for a professional orchestra, Gleason remembers feeling peace and joy when he decided, "Heck, I'll try it."

Fifty years after winning that seat with the Oakland-based symphony and stepping in to lead amateur musicians during his off-hours, Gleason is still right at home. Every Friday, he stands on the podium, rehearsing the 46-member community orchestra he helped build from an unlikely group of six musicians. Funded by the Oakland Department of Parks and Recreation, the nonprofessional group plays primarily at retirement centers and Oakland elementary schools.

"The rehearsal space has changed several times, but not the conductor," says concert mistress Priscilla Magee. At 90, she's been with the orchestra for long enough to call Gleason "Maestro" and says, "Anybody who's conducted an orchestra for 50 years must be a hero. He gets the best out of us. One day, he asked, 'Who will take our place?' I hadn't given it a thought, so I guess for us and for people for whom we perform, music is a lifesaver."

For Gleason and his wife Karen, also a violinist, music has meant connection -- but not a theme song for love at first sight.

"We didn't hit it off," she recalls, about their first meeting at the San Bruno church. "We used to argue about how to bow. I thought he was arrogant and uppity." Eventually, after he asked her to join the community orchestra and "was on his best behavior," friendship deepened into love. Married since 1966, they have three children and five grandkids.

Although Gleason says music lessons "didn't take" with his children, there's no shortage of students who've come to his home for instruction. (A bit of a joker, he calls the lessons "teaching people to create sound by pulling the tail of a horse over the stomach of a sheep.") While Gleason has raised the stock of young, local talent, it's arguably his adult students who have benefited most from his tutelage.

Rossmoor resident Judy Laughlin, 74, took up the violin at age 40. "I credit the fact that after some years with him, I was able to play in community orchestras," she says. Despite wanting to quit several times, she says Gleason's optimistic spirit and "wonderful musicianship" always "pulled her beyond" her discouragement.

Cellist Ariel Witbeck was never a student, but formed a trio with Gleason after moving to Danville in 1966. Later, she played and guest-conducted with the orchestra, and the two colleagues often shared information about young students. Performing under his baton, she says the shoulder surgeries he's had that limit his arm movements are inconsequential.

"It doesn't matter, because he's an excellent violinist. He's no slouch," she says. And then she teases, "Sometimes he nitpicks, stopping to fix things, but he's a true leader."

Gleason remembers clamping his violin to the breast plate of the body cast he wore for 21 years, the consequence of various rotary cuff, pancreatic, open heart and neck surgeries in his past.

Gleason says he's watched for 50 years as many city-supported arts programs in Oakland have suffered cuts, and as the Oakland Community Orchestra has remained pretty much unscathed. He's fought to preserve the orchestra, promoting its service to seniors, adding performances to underserved schools and fighting suggestions to become self-supporting by charging membership dues.

"Some of our members can't afford a membership. If the city doesn't support it, it won't happen," he says.

Gleason plans to retire only when a recently organized advisory committee finds a replacement. "It's not a big job, but it's a big part of my life. I can't imagine just giving it up," he says. When he finally lays down his baton, he'll continue his hobbies: collecting political memorabilia (he has collections for every U.S. president since 1976, plus both Roosevelts), teaching private lessons and listening to music. He says teaching is physical and spiritual enjoyment.

And music? "Music is soul," he declares. "It's the utmost beauty, apart from love itself. To hear it is Heaven on Earth."

