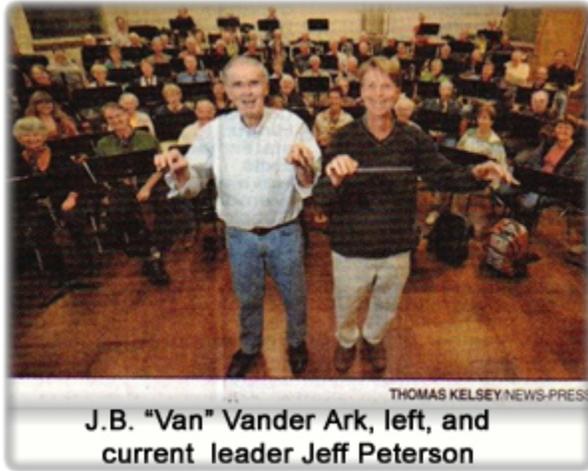


It all started with rehearsals of “Mary Had A Little Lamb.”



J.B. "Van" Vander Ark, left, and current leader Jeff Peterson

Four months later, the new band of 33 people, all age 50 and older, had grown to 55 musicians playing Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" at their first concert Dec. 5, 1995, at La Colina Junior High School.

The audience "gave us a standing ovation," recalled Orcutt flutist Carol Anderson, 76, one of 15 members who has remained with Prime Time Band all these years and a board member from the start. "They were surprised we could do it -- and we were too!"

Since then, the Santa Barbara ensemble has grown to 85 members and marched on to twice-yearly concerts and annual band camps. In June 2011, the group will travel to Washington, D.C., and Alexandria, VA., as one of six U.S. ensembles picked for the National Community Concert Band Sousa Festival.

Prime Time Band will celebrate all that success at its free 15th anniversary concert at 2 p.m. Dec. 12 at San Marcos High School, 4750 Hollister Ave.

Mr. Vander Ark, the band co-founder and original director, will pick up the baton for half the concert with his favorites that the group played during the 10 years he conducted (1995-2005). Current director Jeff Peterson will guide the rest of the performance.

"I thought (the band) would be here forever. Once we started and with the enthusiasm for it, I could see we would grow quickly," Mr. Vander Ark, 77, said. He explained that the idea for the ensemble came from George Pendergast, the father of one of his students at La Colina Junior High School, where he taught band from 1959 until retiring in 1993. Together, they, with financial support from co-founder Nick Rail, owner of Nick Rail Music in Santa Barbara, started what originally was called Prime Time 50-Plus Dream Band.

Rehearsals began in August 1995. The band was the 13th group in New Horizon International Music Association, which has grown to 170 bands worldwide for people 50 and older.

By the third year, the band moved its concerts from La Colina Junior High to Santa Marcos High School's bigger auditorium, where it has played winter and summer concerts since with audiences typically numbering around 850.

Mr. Vander Ark said the band has had members who haven't picked up their instruments in 30 to 50 years, not since high school or college. Some learned their first band instrument. Average age is 73.



“It was unique,” Mr. Vander Ark said about the band when it debuted. “Parents and grandparents were playing, and their kids and families were in the audience.”

The Prime Time Band has played everything from Glenn Miller hits and Broadway to Handel and Dixieland and everywhere from Fiesta to UCSB basketball games, Mr. Vander Ark said.

The band has the sound of a good high school ensemble, Mr. Peterson, 54, said. The members “have a vitality that people in their middle age don’t because of their focus on career and family.”

Mr. Vander Ark, a Byron Center, Mich. native, said he stepped down as director in 2005 because he felt it was time for a younger conductor and he wanted time to travel. He has remained with the band, though, playing the euphonium, a brass instrument he hadn’t picked up in years, and directing the Prime Time Pops Band, a smaller group of Prime Time members who play at senior centers and schools.

Mr. Peterson called Mr. Vander Ark his mentor and “the heart and soul of the group.”

“We’re both pretty low-key,” Mr. Peterson said. “Both of us try to use humor to teach. I use it a little bit more.”

Mrs. Anderson, the flutist, said Mr. Vander Ark emphasizes a legato or smooth, flowing approach in his conducting while Mr. Peterson stresses precision and the beat. “I think Van conducts from the heart. They’re both good musicians. They both want you to get it right.”

Prime Time Band will perform its 15th anniversary concert at 2 p.m. Dec. 12 at San Marcos High School, 4750 Hollister Ave.

J.B. “Van” Vander Ark, co-founder and original director, will conduct the band playing his favorite pieces that the ensemble performed from 1995-2005. Jeff Peterson, the current director, will lead the band in other selections.

For more about the band, call band manager Toni Straka at 962-6983 or go to [www.ptband.org].