

What a blast

Area piper bags some fun

By Mattie Greene
staff writer

Don't be surprised if you hear bagpipes at Derby Middle School in Birmingham.

Science teacher William O'Donnell, a man of Scottish extraction, teaches students how to play bagpipes there.

He's been playing for 12 years and heads his own Michigan Scottish Pipes and Drums Band. He has played before President Gerald Ford and the Crown Prince of Japan and appeared on television.

He never expected all this activity. O'Donnell noted, "I was just pursuing my own interest."

O'Donnell said he has always been fascinated with bagpipes. The fascination comes from having a father, an ex-military man, who loved to listen to bagpipe music, much to the dismay of his neighbor, said O'Donnell, 48. His father was in the 42nd Black Watch Regiment of Scotland during World War I.

"I ALWAYS wanted to play, but where does one go and learn to play bagpipes?" asked O'Donnell. His only music experience was "fooling around with a French Horn as a kid."

He finally realized his dream when he came to teach at Derby in 1970 and met bagpiper and teacher Hans Jens, who was more than happy to teach him how to play.

Once proficient, he began giving private lessons throughout the tri-county area three years ago and then decided to offer the lessons in one place.

He subsequently met with officials at the Orchard Ridge Campus of Oakland Community College and approached them with the idea of having a course in bagpipes. He intended to start with about

12 students. "The first night, 38 people showed up," said O'Donnell.

HE'S TAUGHT more than 70 students and some of his students are teaching others. He taught all the bagpipers in his band. A number of his students have entered competitions.

Over the years he has trained about 70 people. "There is a rather high attrition rate because it takes dedication to learn the instrument," said O'Donnell. O'Donnell said he's had about 20 students who have stuck with it. "A pipe band is undemocratic and people who have difficulty accepting that wind up being gypsies — moving from band to band."

BAGPIPERS ARE a multi-ethnic mix and not limited to the Irish or Scottish. "We have people from all walks of life learning to play," said O'Donnell. The students range in age from 8 to 74.

Depending on ability and persistence, students can learn to play well after a year and a half. "Of course, you're always learning and improving," O'Donnell said. In fact, once the people learned to play well, O'Donnell had to decide what to do with them and he decided to form his own band.

Most bagpipe music is traditional, handed down orally, and often embellished by band directors. During the mid-1740s, the Scottish were subjected to harsh rulers and the playing of bagpipes and the wearing of kilts was strictly forbidden and much of the written music was destroyed.

A person could be hanged for playing bagpipes, said O'Donnell. He said his neighbor may wish the law was still in effect. "My wife likes bagpipes fried," said O'Donnell. He adds, she's tolerant of his playing. The O'Donnells live in Bloomfield Township.

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O'Donnell's students (from left) Stuart Russell, Ian Dickie and Stephanie Spellman learn bagpiping.



STEPHEN CANTRELL/WMT photographer

William O'Donnell, a science teacher, has played his bagpipes before President Gerald Ford and the Crown Prince of Japan.

Jaycee's Buck-ing

for seat on the board

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the second in a series of stories about the candidates who are running for the Farmington Board of Education in the June 11 school election.

By Tom Beer
staff writer

There's a young Buck in the race for a seat on the Farmington Board of Education.

The candidate's name happens to be Buck — J. Thomas Buck of Farmington Hills — and, at 28, he is indeed the youngest of the five candidates who are running for the two openings on Farmington's School Board.

The top two vote getters in the Monday, June 11, election will each serve four-year terms on the seven-member board, which sets policy for the 10,000-student school district.

Challenger Buck, in his first try for a board seat, claimed a "vested interest" in the Farmington Public Schools because his 2-year-old son Andrew would one day attend them.

"My vested interest is that my son is going to be in that school system in a couple of years," said Buck, "and I'd like to get involved to make sure it can do for him what I think it should do — give him the best education possible."

Buck, who runs an education and training program at General Motors' truck and bus plant in Pontiac, points to his background, which he feels "the school board would find valuable."

BEFORE JOINING GM, Buck worked at a savings and loan for two years, gaining experience in branch operations and employee relations. At the Pontiac plant, he has worked in the "equal opportunity area," while becoming involved in employee benefits and labor relations.

An active member of the Farmington-area Jaycees, Buck heads up a "development program" for that club. He has also been involved in Junior Achievement programs.

Asked to name some local school issues, Buck said he was concerned about "a lack of involvement in the school system."

"I can't see the community getting involved with the board meetings," he said. "When they (the board) were talking about a tax increase, very few people came to the meetings to express their concerns about it."

Actually, at a recent public hearing, only one person spoke against the revenue-producing 1.3-mill increase subsequently passed by the board.

"I was extremely surprised at that," Buck said. "I asked the board at the last meeting, 'What other evidence do you have that the community supports or does not support the millage increase besides what you heard at the public hearing?'"

"They said that was all they had. That kind of surprised me. I'd think they'd do some kind of poll, or take an advisory vote to find out where the community is on this."

While he criticizes the board on the recent millage increase ("I'm not sure they needed the 1.3-



J. Thomas Buck
youngest of five candidates

school board race

mill increase"), Buck said he's "not sure" he'd make it a campaign issue.

"I'm trying to find some basic support in other areas," he said. "I'm not sure my support is going to come from voters who vote every time."

"When you're running against a current board president (incumbent Helen Penrose), a PTA president (Florence Fitzpatrick) and others who are very much tied into the school system, you've got to look up some other avenues."

BUCK SAID he would be spending lots of time — but little money — on his campaign.

"My energy level is pretty high," he said. "The way my campaign is going to have to go is that I have to get people involved who support me, who see the advantages of having me on the board."

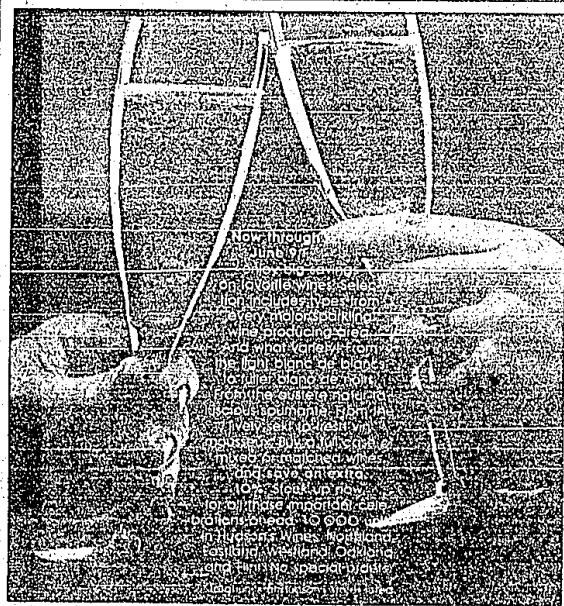
"The structure of my campaign, I guess, is getting other people involved, and having them get still more people involved."

The Bucks — Tom, Karen and baby Andrew — have lived at 35714 Power Road for the past five years. Buck's parents are both graduates of Farmington High School. Born in Ann Arbor, Buck was taken all over the country by his father, who was in the Air Force. "We lived in about 10 different states while I was growing up," he said.

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