

Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois

Ken Conrady Oral History Interview

Abbie Schaefer, Interviewer

Godfrey, Illinois

October 11, 2018

Abbie Schaefer (AS): The following interview was conducted with Ken Conrady on behalf of the Madison County Oral History Project that is part of Madison Historical: The Online Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois. The interview took place on Thursday, October 11th, 2018, at the home of Mr. Conrady in Godfrey, Illinois. The interviewer is Abbie Schaefer, a history student and research assistant at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Alright, so. If you want to just start off, um, talking about where you were born? When, where you grew up?

Ken Conrady (KC): Ah, I'm originally a resident of the state of Oklahoma. I got my bachelor's degree at Phillips University in Enid, Oklahoma, and had a double major in both French Horn and Piano. And then I received a, uh, assistantship to get my master's at SIUC in Carbondale in 1957. That's where I got my master's degree, and then I started teaching here in the Alton area. Actually taught at Bunker Hill Illinois Band and Choir for three years. And then in 1961, uh, moved to Alton, Illinois. I will say, too, that I met my wife when I was working on my master's at Carbondale and we married in 1959. Then after teaching three years in Bunker Hill, both my wife and I, both my wife, Jean, and I, started teaching in the Alton schools and we pretty much stayed in the Alton schools until we retired. I retired in 1989 and she retired, I believe, in 2001.

AS: Okay, great. Um, so, why did you initially move to southern Illinois?

KC: Ah, actually, I just preferred the climate and everything else about the arts in the Illinois, er, much more prevalent than they were in rural Oklahoma. So there was no question about where I wanted to live and work. Because I loved living in the, in the Alton, where we have so many opportunities for artistic expression. And, uh, and I, through the years, in Alton, I've been involved in the, uh, Alton Symphony, the Alton Muni Band, the Greater Alton Concert Association, and, I don't know, I have many other music organizations, but the thing that I, one of the things that I think you're quite interested in is the Youth Symphony, which is, back in 19, in the '60s, there was a music program, band and orchestra program, at all of the four junior highs at that time. But, there were not enough string students in each of the schools to have an orchestra. For instance, the smallest, Central Junior High, they might have had three violins and two violas, but it's not enough to make up an orchestra, so the high school orchestra director at that time, who was Larry Crabbs, he and I decided, "wouldn't this be great if we could form an organization and let these excellent students, the ones that want extra training, to meet together once a week to play a little bit more complicated music?" And of course, obviously, this would have benefited his high school program greatly. And so in 1969, we started with a Board of Directors of local music teachers and community leaders that were very encouraging to us. Because they thought it was a great project, and I almost have to laugh about it, because the first year, we had a budget of five hundred dollars. And I thought, that was to pay the conductor, and maybe a little bit to the manager, and I thought, "Oh, my

goodness, are we going to be able to do this?" And then when I have to kind of laugh about it because our present budget is close to thirty thousand dollars per year. So, you can see that we have grown through the years. We started out just having the Alton, uh, Youth Symphony, but then we found that, you know, we really need to, if we have a feeder group going into that, so we formed the Alton *Junior* Symphony that feeds into the Alton Symphony now, so they are both, uh, I would say of equal importance. And in addition to what has through the years, we thought, "well, you know, we can't march in a parade very well with our violins and violas, but how do we get that word out to who we are and what we do?" So, we formed a small chamber group that goes out into the community and plays at nursing homes, and senior citizen centers, and Kiwanis Club, and Rotary Club, and organizations like that so they know what we're trying to do with the children in the community. We do have a lot of support from the community. Parents are, of course, always very responsive when they see their child getting, getting a good opportunity. And what we have found out through the years that we didn't realize it so much at the time, but, we are such a valuable tool for music students that go to parochial schools. In fact, we have quite a few students that are in the organization from parochial schools. And also home-schooled students is another one, a wonderful opportunity for them. And, uh, it's just worked out great for them. And we continue to kind of move along with the support of the community. And one thing we do, we have enough support through grants and, uh, financial support from our, um, patrons, that we do not have to charge the students anything for being in the organization. Another thing that has proved very profitable for the students that we found out, well, okay, this student has the ability to be in the organization, but he needs extra help. So we've hired sectional leaders that for instance, the fall session that we have going on right now, we have I think a dozen rehearsals and out of those dozen rehearsals we will have sectional coaches that come in that are specialists with their instrument. I remember we have woodwind sectionals, we have a flute specialist, a clarinet specialist, and whatever else we have at the time. A brass specialist, we have a trumpet specialist, and a trombone specialist, or, um, whatever we need. And with the strings, of course, we always have a violin, viola, cello, and bass specialist to come in to work with the students to give them some, uh, very close supervision and very good training.

AS: Yeah. So, just to define the term, you would say "sectional" here is just the individual instrument?

KC: Yes, when I say "sectional," we're going to take, like, for instance, last night they had the, I believe the woodwinds sectionals. So the six flutes went out with this specialist and worked in their own classroom and then the clarinets worked in another classroom and that's the way it worked out for them. So you can see we've kind of grown from our five hundred dollar beginning [laughs] that was, that, "gee, oh gee, can we do this?" And what it's turned into. And we have a, the president of our organization is Joe Cacciatori; he's been the president for a number of years. His wife is on the board and she is fantastic in writing grants. She is a, uh, very good money person, put it that way. That is her career though, she works in the finance with the, whatever organization she's working with. So she is wonderful in helping us get grants from Boeing and Illinois Arts Council. And another thing we do in addition to the sectionals, we have a soloist every year. And they audition in the fall and then they are able to perform, it's usually a movement of a concerto, for the spring concert. And then, in addition to offering, we also offer grants for private study if we have the finances to do it. And in addition to that, we send usually one or two students up to the University of Illinois every summer to study at the Illinois Summer Youth Music Camp. So they get additional training there. So the kids, and the parents that want their child to have extra training, we have a lot of opportunities for musical development and growth.

AS: Yeah. You would say, then, that, just going back to the very beginning of the organization, that it was kind of a supplemental thing to the Alton School District?

KC: I would say it was...it started out that way, but, for instance right now, we have a student I know from Staunton, one from Jerseyville, and we also have, it seems strange, but a lot of students coming in from the, uh, Ferguson-Florissant area. Because some of our sectional leaders teach there, and so it's kind of a conduit for bringing those students into the youth symphony. Originally, it, in the initial stages, it really was kind of a supplement thing, but it's grown to be much more than that. Because we weren't thinking that big in the beginning, you know. And we had some wonderful community members that had worked on huge drives for building the, you know, redoing the YWCA, this one lady was fantastic in helping us get a good footing. Because, at the time, I was probably all of what, thirty years old? And pretty inexperienced compared to some of these people [smiling] that had been in organizations in their fifties and sixties and were so astute in getting finances from the community, because they knew how to do these drives, which I really didn't at the time, because all of my training at the time had been in teaching music, you know, which I loved, you know.

AS: Okay. Um, so you talked about, like, the other Alton, like the Alton Muni Band, and different organizations in the city. Um, what led you to create the Youth Symphony specifically, rather than just, you know, encouraging students to join those other community bands instead?

KC: Well, the, the age group that we're working with is basically what used to be junior high, now I'll call it middle school. So those kids do not have the skill yet to be in Muni Band or the Alton Symphony, although we do a joint program with the Alton Youth Symphony and the Alton Symphony, and very, very often those kids then move up to the Alton Symphony when they, because it only goes through eighth grade, so they get to ninth grade, they go to Alton High that have an orchestra, if they don't, then the other avenue to continue their music career would be to go to the Alton Symphony.

AS: Yeah, so you, you have a good relationship with the Alton Symphony...

KC: Oh, yeah, very good. Very good relationship, um, and that is so fortunate because both of us profit from it, you know? And then also, whenever we have a joint program in the spring, where we do a side-by-side, where the, one of the, uh, students that are, so to speak, graduating from the Alton Youth Symphony, they sit by the first chair violinist, another one sits by the first chair violist, you know, so they can see what it really feels like to play "big time," you know. And I think they're kind of shocked, probably, when they first see some of the Alton Symphony music because it's so much more complicated than, than what the Youth Symphony music is.

AS: So we talked a bit about the beginning of the Alton Youth Symphony, but once it got going a little bit, and you guys were working more with, like, fundraising, and getting more into the groove of things, how would you, I mean, tell me more about that.

KC: It has kind of just developed naturally over the years. As I said we, we hadn't thought at all about homeschooled students, you know, and then all of a sudden realized, "wow, what an opportunity for these students," you know. Of course, they have an organization, so once you get, once you touch base with the organization, then they immediately funnel their, uh, children in. And what we found out, too, that the

children that are homeschooled are usually wonderful musicians, because the parents see that they have plenty of time to practice. So they're, they're wonderful musicians in most cases, you know, so. That was a really eye-opening thing for us that we hadn't even thought about, you know, but I think also there's more homeschooling being done now than there was back in 1970 when we formed this. And you might wonder how I, uh, how we got this started. Larry and I talked about this, but we thought, well, you know, "we need to have a good plan as to how to do this," you know. So, very fortunately, Dr. Marvin Rabin from the University of Wisconsin did his dissertation on forming a youth symphony. So I got his doctoral dissertation and then we copied and copied and copied from that, you know, and there are just certain things, you know. First you want to make sure that you have good relations with your local music teachers, you don't want to think you're doing an upmanship on them, so that's priority number one. Then you want to try to do something that's positive for the community as well as the music program, too. And, again, as I said, we have students from Jerseyville and Staunton, and sometimes get some Granite City, I mean, they come from a large area because parents get online anymore. And they say, "Oh, that's an organization that, that will help our Johnny or our Susie," you know, "become better musicians." So. We try to do just whatever we can to, uh, develop the skills of these students, you know, so when they get to high school, they have all the more skills to, to promote their program or to promote the high school program. It would really be good for any band or orchestra, because most of the students that come from Jerseyville or Staunton, they don't have an orchestra, of course, but it will help their musicianship in their band. So they profit from it anyway, even though they don't have an orchestra there.

AS: Yeah. So you have all these students from outside the community. Was it always like that? Way back in, I mean, in the '70s when it first started?

KC: No. It was not. No, no, I'd, I think it was basically pretty much just Alton. But then you can see how it's expanded. Not only in the outer-lying communities, but also into, like I said, Ferguson-Florissant, you know. And also, too, uh, we...I'm trying to think. We, I told you that we offer these, ah, study grants to the students so they can get private study, especially if we see that there's a financial need from this student. This Johnny Jones is, can be a really good trumpet player, but his parents just don't have the financial means to, to give him those private lessons. We've just, all of these things were not inaugurated initially. Initially, there were just the organization that met once a week, and we gathered them all together. But, too, uh, what the other communities know, for a number of years, we would take a spring tour every year. And we would go to East Alton, Wood River, Jerseyville, Bunker Hill, Southwestern, all the surrounding school districts, so they can see what, what is available for their children. And that has really helped our program due to, so they can get out into the community and see what's out there for their child. But. Just continuing to try to kind of innovate, you know. As years go by, it, things change different. It used to be the junior high, but then, then when Alton High changed to a four- year high school, then, okay, then that shoved us back a year. The literature that we do now is not as difficult as it was in the early '70s y'know when we had those extra, that extra year. And one extra year in the development of a musician at that age is really great, because they can make great progress in one year.

AS: So, were you the first, in some cases, or even all cases, were you, was the Alton Youth Symphony maybe the first time some of these students were joining an orchestra? Or learning an instrument? Or was it more people that already had some,

KC: No, most of these kids had, they had, they called a, they had a string program at each of these

schools, but most of them had not been in an orchestra. They didn't know what orchestra was all about. And the nice thing about it was, for instance, the strings, they thought, "oh gee, I get to play with my, my flute friend," or "my trumpet friend," they got to play in a mix of full symphony orchestra, you know. That's one thing that, for instance, in the Alton Schools right now, these strings do not have that experience of playing with winds together in an orchestra. So this also gives them the chance to play in a full, full symphonic setting where they can get used to hearing percussion and tubas and trumpets and whatever else, you know. So it's just another experience for them that they wouldn't have otherwise.

AS: Okay. So you touched a little bit on fundraising and the grant writing and everything with that, um, could you tell me a little bit more about how that developed back when you were starting and when it was getting going?

KC: Yes. Well, I think, in the very beginning and up to this date, we send out a solicitation letter for support in the fall, which we have, probably, I think this year we had a mailing list of five hundred former students, parents, businesses, that responded. And we have kept that pattern all the way through the years and we've been able to survive through that. But also we got a wonderful, uh, we were the recipient of a wonderful trust that was set up for us about ten or fifteen years ago. A rather wealthy person in the area was dying, and his, his cousin saw what was happening, and he said, "well, you know, if I give my, my estate to the Saint Louis Symphony it won't mean very much, but to a small organization..." So, fortunately, this lady came into the Halpin Music Company. Barb Kramer, who worked there, her daughter had been in the Youth Symphony, she suggested, "well, what about the, gave contribution to the Youth Symphony whenever that time comes?" And it turns out, at the time, this guy's mother was still living, so he had a trust set up so it was not to go into effect until his mother was deceased. And once his mother deceased, the trust opens up. And we, however, he was a very wise guy, we can only use, uh, two dollars for every one dollar that we raise, and it can only be taken from the interest of the, of the trust. So he was a very savvy person. But, it's, it'll be going long after I'm dead and gone, that's the wonderful part about it, too. It's one of those cases where a guy can see what he can do for the community and the music organization. And he was a music lover, too. I went to his house one time and he had all of these opera recordings and all, so he was a very serious music lover, you know, so. It was wonderful of him. And, here, his cousin comes to all of our concerts now and she can really, thinking, "Oh, what my uncle did for this organization!" You know. So it has to be very rewarding to her, of course it would've. And he actually lived for a few years after he set it up and he would go on tours with us so he got to know the organization, too, so that was wonderful for him. And wonderful for us! So, uh, that's been a real boost to our organization, too, financially. But, uh, we still have to do our work, though, he's not just going to dole out the kitty and say, "here, here's my funds." No. You show us that you're providing your support and I will supplement whatever you do with your organization.

AS: So you guys, I mean, obviously, give back a lot to the community, the Alton community, um...

KC: Oh, we do. Give a great back. Give back a great deal to the Alton community.

AS: Yeah. Even just with the students and what they get involved with, but also putting on these concerts and bringing music more into people's homes, and stuff.

KC: Right, right. Because whenever we go to Southwestern. These kids don't know what an orchestra is,

because they've never experienced one, you know? And they see kids playing, their age, playing right in front of them. I remember one time we also took, we went to Madison, Illinois, and I thought, you know, I don't know, when I saw the students coming in, I thought, "Gee, this may not be a good idea." But, at the time we had, hard to believe, but we had two harpists with us that day, doing the, uh, the famous thing from, is it *Swan Lake*? Where you have the flutes accompanied, flute solo accompanied by harps? And these kids were just mesmerized. First, they'd never seen a harp before, and there they had two of them right in front of them, you know, and I thought, "well, wasn't this a good experience for those kids!" You know? So you never know when you're going to touch on something that will really catch their hearts and do something good for them. And because we do these things, we also get support from the Illinois Arts Council, too, see. But we have to prove to them, though, every year, you know what we're doing to supplement the arts into the community.

AS: Okay, I see, nice. So... Alton, of course, has changed since you moved here. And, ah, I would say, I mean, you worked as the music director for the school, right?

KC: Actually, you know, as it turned out, I was a band and orchestra director for, let me see, I think... five or six years, and then the position of "Director of Music" came into being. And I was named to that position. But that's when we had twenty-five music teachers at the time. And we had a population of twelve thousand students, you know. Four junior highs, you know, and multiple elementary schools all over the place. So, of course I would coordinate festivals and things like that. But then that, those jobs were eliminated in 1975 at a cutback, so I went back into a teaching position and just taught band and orchestra from there on, until I retired.

AS: Okay. Could you tell me more about how the school district changed and what you saw in that?

KC: Well, the biggest change that I've seen is the, uh, is the decline in enrollment over a period of years. But, um, with that decline in enrollment, of course, it changes everything. You lose students and you lose staff, you know. Staff is always condensed as we lost students. Although, we have kept a very strong music program in Alton. I think that we, as far as the public schools go, I think there's at least a thousand students studying band and orchestra instruments. So we've, we've kept a strong music program going. But still not in quite the numbers that it used to be when we had twelve thousand students. There's no way you can kind of replicate that.

AS: Yeah, that's amazing. So you have all those school orchestras, and you have the youth orchestra, so kids were doing both, you said.

KC: Oh yeah, oh yeah. You know, that's another important thing that we've made sure, that's what I've learned from this doctoral dissertation, that a student must be in their school organization before they can become a member of the Youth Symphony. It just prevents someone saying, "This goody two-shoes, I'm going to be in the Youth Symphony, but I'm going to get out of my..." That doesn't work. We've had some scenes where we've had to say, "Sorry, Susie, you've got to be in your local band and orchestra before you get into the Youth Symphony," you know. That's rare, but it, but it has happened through the years a couple times. Because we want those teachers to support us. After all, they're giving us their good students, you know. Don't want to take the cream out of their crop.

AS: Yeah. Could you tell me more about that dissertation? That's so interesting.

KC: About what?

AS: That dissertation that you used.

KC: Well, ah, I, I can't remember everything that I learned from it, you know, but it told us to, of course, get... we started out, and I'm sure because of this dissertation, started out with a board of twelve people that included community members that were very astute in fundraising, music lovers in the community, and music teachers. So it was kind of a split of entrepreneurs that knew how to promote things, others that were good at getting finances, and then the music teachers supported us. And we had great support from the music teachers at that time, too, because they could see what it could do for their program, you know. Just another...it was also great for the Alton community, you know, to have another organization that we're proud of to show off the community. But the dissertation...golly, it was, it was, I don't know, how many hundreds of pages thick, you know, and...we just took the main ideas from it, in that we wanted to make sure we had the support of the music teachers, number one, you know, and to try to reach out into the community to get their support. And, of course, PR was very important at that time, getting it out, getting the public relations going at that time. We had, one of our board members was Mr. Leroy Fritz, who was responsible, really, for starting the music program in the Alton schools back in the early, maybe late '40s. And he, later on, became director of Public Relations for the Alton schools, so he was very good at getting, knowing how to get public, how to get the word out about good organizations. Because parents always love to see kids doing good things, too, so. It's easier to do that...we have, we have a concert in the fall, we have a concert in the spring, and then another thing that I said, I told you earlier that we take the organization out and go to three different schools in one day. Which is a challenge! [laughs] To go to three schools in one day and have the kids back to their home school so they can catch the bus. And, invariably, there is a violin that, that's fallen off of the, of a stand or something, so there's always a little bit of a small crisis to take care of. So, we've done something differently. Instead of spending that money going out, what we do is supplement school districts to pay for their bus to bring their kids here. So we give a concert for them at Hathaway Hall. I remember last year, I think it was East Alton, Wood River came, Jerseyville came, I can't remember how many different schools, but. And also from St. Louis; a couple schools came from St. Louis. So, we don't pay a lot, but it's amazing how just paying for a little bit of their bus money helps them to accept the invitation, that way. Then it also tells the, shows those kids what we can do and what they can become a part of, you know.

AS: Yeah. So you mentioned the PR thing, um, how is that... especially in developing the orchestra, when it was first starting out, what was that landscape like?

KC: You know, as I... because we started out with such a small budget, at first I think everyone thought this was strictly an Alton school thing. But you know, well, that's where we did rehearse. We rehearsed at, at Alton High because that's where the director, where he felt comfortable with. And then later on we moved out to...we've rehearsed at several different places. We used to rehearse at North Middle School and now we rehearse in a wonderful facility at Lewis and Clark College. So that is just fabulous, and we're so fortunate that Lewis and Clark allows us to rehearse there in that large rehearsal room where they normally... Monday they have Jazz Band there, Tuesday, that's our evening to use the facility. So we're just very fortunate to have that connection with the Lewis and Clark. And sometimes we have a Lewis

and Clark faculty member on our board, too, because we want to keep that connection. In fact, for a number of years, the President of the college, his wife was on the board. So we've had a lot of wonderful connections with Lewis and Clark that are very important to us. Actually, the manager of Hathaway Hall used to be in the Youth Symphony, too, so, you know, we've got a lot of good connections with Lewis and Clark College.

AS: Yeah. Those good connections with the alumni and all the businesses...

KC: Oh, yes, with the alumni. You know, and with our, uh, as we talked about earlier, we are celebrating our fiftieth anniversary next year and just hard to believe how the program has developed through the years. A lot of good ideas of different people. We hope to have a lot of alumni come back, maybe play with us. And the original director is going to be directing one number, and I'm going to be directing one number in the program, and the very special part of that is one of our graduates, ah, that was in the Youth Symphony, Michael Gagliardo, who's now the director of the Gadsden, Alabama Youth Symphony, has been hired to write a composition for the fiftieth anniversary of the Youth Symphony. So he will come and direct the Youth Symphony that he was in when he was a young kid, you know. A really good trumpet player. So this is exciting for him and his parents and for all of of us, to have him come back. To think one of our graduates...many of our graduates have gone on to, one of our really good flutists is now principal flutist of the North Carolina Symphony. And I could go on and on about where...my daughter played harp in it and she's now a professional harpist, so. It's led to the career of many different people that are now...when you think, that was fifty years ago, you know, so, they're out and some of them are probably getting ready to retire now! [laughs] They were one of the first ones.

AS: Yeah. That's wonderful. So we were talking about the community. Was the Alton Youth Symphony, obviously gave back to the community in that the students are learning new things and bringing it back that way, but, um, in regards to the fundraising, was that ever, like, interacted with there? Like, go out into the community and fundraise? Was that something that you ever had to do?

KC: No, you know, we have not found it necessary to do that. I think whenever you're in a school music program, the funds are always so limited that every kid that's in the, at least in the Alton schools, they're always selling candy bars or cheese and sausage or something, you know, so we said, "we need to try to avoid that if we can, you know, because we don't want to replicate what they're trying to do for their own program." So we, simply, simply through the solicitation letter and grant writing, we've been able to manage it financially. Of course this trust helps us, too, you know. So. In fact, this trust, we have to use so much of the money, and because we're a non-for-profit organization, ah, we're free to take some of that money if it's a two to one. If we raise two we can take one dollar from the, or vice, it's really vice versa, if we take, if we raise one dollar we can take two dollars from the interest that this account has accrued through the years. Of course, then, right now, the economy is so good that the investments have been wonderful the last couple years. For a while it was low. Wasn't easy. But now, investments are so good that it's wonderful for us.

AS: Yeah. So related to that, could you tell me more about how Alton changed as a whole, since you've been here since 1961, you said?

KC: Well, ah, Alton has changed a great deal. In the, ah, there's a much larger black population, much

less white population. But just in general, a great reduction in people period, whether they're white or black, you know, so. That has been a major change because I think when we first came here, they had all, advertised almost forty thousand, now I think it's down to thirty-two or something, too, you know. But, ah, the arts are still very important to the Alton community, you know, when you consider we have the Alton Symphony and the Concert Association and Muni Band and the Giacobbe Arts Center is trying to everything they can to promote the arts, too, and so there are a lot of good things happening down there to further the arts in the Alton...kind of like the Wildey Theater in Edwardsville, although probably not as active as the Wildey Theater is. But, ah, the Alton community really supports that organization, too.

AS: Yeah, just besides, arts, too, you talked about the population declining, do you have any more insights about that? Or anything you remember about that time?

KC: No, I don't have any more insight on that. Just to tell you simply that the population has dwindled little by little every year, you know. It's gotten smaller. People want to live in rural areas, you know. I'm a piano technician by trade since I've retired, and I go out in many rural, I think, "oh there couldn't possibly be a house here," and then I turn to this winding road to find this glorious estate. So many people want to escape into the hinterlands, you know, which I'm finding, I'm kind of shocked, but how many people I find that want to escape [laughs] I hate to say civilization, but they want to do their own thing in their own private space.

AS: So does that population decline, did that affect the symphony at all? The Youth Symphony, or even any of the bands in Alton?

KC: Oh, I think it's, it is more difficult for everyone. You know, because sometimes, sometimes you lose a family that may not have anyone in music, then the next time you lose a family that they had a really good flutist and a clarinetist. "Oh, I hate to see them..." you know, so. It's both ways. Sometimes it doesn't affect this, in other cases it does, you know. But. Sometimes parents want to see a very strong academic situation for their child so they may want to send their, I know we had a really good little boy that was a really good percussionist in the Alton Youth Symphony, but now he's going to CBC [Christian Brothers College] High School in St. Louis because his parents want that specialized training, you know, so we lose some kids to the parents who...because most of the parents who have kids in the Youth Symphony, they are pushers. They don't want, they're not settled with a "B" grade from their child. "You're going to be an A student," you know. I mean, not in every case, but in most cases, these parents want them, in the first place, they're driving them to this extra rehearsal every week, so, "Hey, Johnny, I'm taking you there; I'm expecting you to produce," you know. So, uh, that has been a factor. But we lose some kids that way, but maybe not a great number of kids, but what we do lose some excellent students that parents want them to have an excellent academic opportunity.

AS: So have you noticed changes in students' patterns? Or the way students are learning and interacting? I mean, you've been a teacher for a long time.

KC: Mm-hmm. No, I don't see that happening. Now, my wife does a program called "ROAR," which means that volunteers in the community go out into the schools and they, they, they actually go to the schools between 7:30 and 8 when the kids are waiting to get into their classroom. And then they have the third graders read to them. So it's really to promote reading, you know, I forget...the acronym's R-O-A-R,

but "Reading," or...I don't know what it is. But it's just to promote reading. And that's gotten a really strong hold, but, obviously what that means is that the kids need help at home, or they wouldn't be doing this, see. That means the reading skills are not where they should be, so it's just another tool to help those classroom teachers to promote reading and the importance of reading. But again, if it were in a school where every kid could read by the time they got to school, they wouldn't have it, but, so, you can see it's a necessary supplement to the educational environment.

AS: Have you seen that kind of thing with music students, too?

KC: Not so much. No, really not so much, you know, because...no, I don't see that. I see parents still having a strong interest in keeping their kids in music, you know. It's amazing how many kids we have in the music program, it's a huge number, you know. Especially when you consider the socio-economics of our community. That has changed a great deal. Since we've moved here in the '60s, you know, because we had all these industries here, my goodness. You know, we had Olin, and Laclede Steel, and I can think of all of these...and again, those were the board members to our organization in the beginning. See, we, we were able to ask some of them to help us and support us, and of course you get the leaders in a terrific organization like they had, if they can run a corporation, then you know that they can help you a great deal in learning how to fundraise, too, so. That's been a big change, too, you lose all of those high-powered executives, you know, and their families, too, you know that, uh...has been a big change in our community.

AS: So, you came here in the '60s, and you came from SIUC. Do you have any perspective on how SIUE altered this? I mean, are your students moving on through college? I mean, you seem to keep in touch in, with them, so.

KC: Oh, yes, yeah, yeah. Many of them go on, many of them, in fact, maybe they're friends of yours that go on to SIUE to major in music, you know. It's a good stepping stool for them. I, there is a symphony, a youth symphony, I believe in Carbondale, or there was at one time, but, but that's the other thing, we're the, I think one of the few youth symphonies around, you know, so if a kid wants to participate in a youth symphony, then this is one of their choices, too, you know. Well, there used to be...I think there is still a Belleville Youth Symphony, though, too, but I don't know much about it, though. It hasn't, I don't think it has quite the history that we've had, though. I think it's gone through some ups and downs, you know, but, but I don't know that for sure either, so. But we've been able to stay consistent year after year to try to grow and grow, but the key catalyst for us was the give, receiving that trust. The funds from that trust. Otherwise, we would have to be selling cookies, too, like the public school students have to do, you know. But fortunately we don't have to do that, so. And the parents appreciate that, because they know they were already, that then also, you know, our program always lists, you know, the contributors, you know, so. Let them know that we appreciate what they're doing for us financially.

AS: So I read that you have a lot of, I mean, alumni that are working still with the Youth Symphony? Could you tell me more about that, how your students are going on and then maybe coming back? Or people going out of state?

KC: Yes, well, you know what we have done, we've tried to keep track of some of our graduates and especially some of them that live locally and have got their, maybe their bachelor degree from SIUE and

are teaching in the area, then we use those students to come back and be sectional leaders. In fact, one of them teaches cello, and so she comes back and teaches the cello section, you know. So yes, it comes back, what we've given out comes right back to us in many cases. That's just one example of the...another case, we had a, used to be principal flutist of the Alton Symphony, she now is one of our sectional leaders, and to think of, I'm sure these little kids are amazed by when they hear her play. Because I think their eyes are bugging out when they hear, you know, what she can do with the flute, too, you know, just one example. And we have, we have others, actually, the manager of Hathaway Hall is our string bass coach, too, so. A lot of them come back to us in many different ways. Sometimes, I couldn't, I wouldn't even remember that they were in Youth Symphony, you know, probably because I've lost, I've tried to keep in close touch. There's a few of us that have been board members from almost the beginning, you know, and I'm one of those few [laughs], that has been there from the beginning. But since I've, since this other guy and I have formed it, I feel like this is what I can do for our community, you know. I was always, whenever I was director of music, I was sometimes kind of disturbed because I always felt like these music teachers were leaders of the community, you know, you got to find something to support, whether it's the Youth Symphony, or the Choral Society, or the Muni Band, or whatever. Find something, make our community a better musical community, you know. For whoever.

AS: So we talked, back a while ago in the beginning, about how you would have students doing solos or concertos. Could you just, maybe, walk me through how a season would go? Ah, normally, naturally, like rehearsals and then concerts and whatnot?

KC: Sure. Well, we have auditions in August. And then we start rehearsals the, ah, usually like the middle of September, then we have I think twelve rehearsals or so and give a concert at the end of November. We take a break through the Christmas season and then start again in January. And rehearse January through the end of April, give a concert at the end of April with that soloist, but also inserted in there is the side-by-side concert with the Alton Symphony. And then, also, at the, close to the end of the season is that concert at Hathaway where we bring in the outside schools. At least that's what we've been doing the last couple of years, and it seems to work out really well. We don't have to worry about dropped violins, like [laughs] when we get on and off buses three times. "How are we going to get those string bases and cellos on the bus?" So. It was a challenge, but a good one. Profitable for the, you know, but this seems to be physically lots easier for us, this way, to, you know. Easier to transport a busload of kids rather than a busload of instruments, you know. And instruments are fragile, you know, you get violins and violas and cellos, my goodness, they're very fragile. So you have to handle them with care, so. It's been easier for us just to give the concert at Hathaway Hall.

AS: So, previously, that part in the season was you traveling outside, right?

KC: Yes, we traveled every spring, right. And of course that's a big challenge, too, because working around spring testing, because there is so much testing in schools. And if we did it all set up with the Missouri schools, then it doesn't fit with the Illinois schools, so it's, it was a real challenge to do that. And it will continually be, you know. Because they have to be there for that testing, you know, the principals will not excuse, and we understand. They will not excuse students for missing testing. Because it represents their school, and their school's got to look good, you know, so. It's part of the game these days.

AS: So, tell me about the music that you guys were playing. I mean, you said previously you were playing more complicated things, back in the beginning when it was starting?

KC: Yeah, in the beginning we were doing a little bit, yes. Because the, for instance, the winds had more, ah, more control of their instruments, especially, you know. Like, for instance, a trumpet, first trumpet player may have to play really high, you know, so the music we're doing now... I tell you, we did, for instance, this... we try to do a variety of music, and we always do like a, an overture of some type, you know. And then do a "pop" piece of some type, like music from, ah, a local music, a prominent musical, like, that is popular at the present time. Then we try to do something that's challenging for the strings, if we can, you know, Vivaldi piece of some kind that really shows them off. Or, ah, the young director that we have now, Abby Knoche, is very good at selecting things that fit the orchestra. [door closing] And, ah, so that works out well because she really knows, she also teaches at a high school in St. Louis so she's very familiar with all levels of teaching, and she's very good at picking music that fits the orchestra. But it's always a variety of music, too. And then of course the junior symphony feeds into that, they do much more [door closing] traditional things, too, but it's just to help them get used to being in an organization more than anything else. But we also have sectionals for the junior symphony, too, see, so we start the training early [laughs]. Goodness! I think back, you know, how it's changed from the beginning, you know, we didn't even have a junior symphony in the beginning, you know, just, it just evolves, evolves, evolves, you know how it, knowing how we can, if we can make this organization better if we do this, oh yes. We've had some wonderful board members through the years, too, that have been very wise in helping guide us. I remember in my early, young years as an organizer I thought that we should pay for, to send a student up to the University of Illinois. I thought it was so right to pay for the total package, you know, so that the kid would be free to, or the parents would be free not having to pay. And another lady that was, I found later out was much wiser than I was. "No, let's do it this way, let's give two scholarships and make it a half scholarship, so that the parents have involvement." And she was so right. And I was so wrong. [laughs] But that was in my early, young days before I had the experience with an organization, you know, where she had all this experience with the YWCA and all these other organizations, so. We all learn through this board, you know, we always, we had some really wise board members that guided us along.

AS: Yeah, so the board was obviously very important,

KC: Oh, it was.

AS: Yeah.

KC: It still is, you know.

AS: Mm-hmm.

KC: In those early formative years, you know, they'd get us going in the right direction, you know. So we didn't, we wanted to steer the ship in the right way. And we have. It's worked out really well, I think.

AS: Yeah, I mean, your fifty, fiftieth year anniversary this year, right?

KC: Right! Fifty years, yeah. Who would have thought, you know, that when we started that the, that I

would even be around for the fiftieth anniversary, you know [laughter]. Fabulous, you know, that I can see this happen, you know.

AS: Yeah. I think it's just a, it's probably a testament to how much, um, the Youth Symphony has affected the community. Have you seen that in your time working with them, for sure?

KC: Well, yeah, you know, it's really given back so much to the community, to, you know. And I don't know how much it's, how much it's meant, you know, but I know how proud the parents are. "Oh, my kid was in the Youth Symphony!" You know. Very proud that they can be in that, you know. That they could, more than that, that they could, it sees, they can see where it takes them, too. They can see, oh, for instance, we've got one little guy that, ah, he's way beyond what, what the school program can offer him, you know? So this is a perfect vehicle for him, because his parents want more out of him, you know. You can do more than, you know. And that's, that's the type of student, it's a wonderful vehicle for that, you know. Those parents that want their child to have extra experiences.

AS: Yeah, okay. Well, is there anything else you want to talk about with the Alton, with Alton as a community, or with the AYS in general?

KC: You know, I can't think of anything else, I think we pretty much covered everything about the Youth Symphony that I can, all the information that I can give you, ah. It's been a pleasure for me to just kind of follow through all these years to see what has happened. And we've had probably, through the years, maybe five different directors, you know, or maybe five or six different directors. But we keep it moving, you know. And five or six different managers, too, you know. But when we started out, we didn't have a manger, but then we decided, "No, we need someone to help that director, too." There's more to it than just waving your hands, you know, to rehearse. So now when the director walks in, the chairs are all set up and everything's all ready to go. So that manager is as important as a director, we have found, in collecting all the music, getting it ready to go, contacting parents, you know, emails, you know, so. All of that paperwork. And especially with the emails and computers, you know, that is just, that has been probably the biggest change, because we can communicate with parents now so easily where we couldn't fifty years ago. Everything was by snail mail then, you know, or telephone. It's been a big change. And a good one. A good one.

AS: Alright, well. That's all the questions I had for you, but if there's nothing else you want to talk about then. Thank you so much for talking with me, Mr. Conrady, Ken.

KC: You're very welcome. Glad to do it for the Youth Symphony.

AS: Wonderful. Well, congrats on fifty years, um, looking forward to see, you know, where it goes next. So exciting!

KC: Thank you very much.