

Striking a chord in the workforce

Graduate of the School of Piano Technology for the Blind's first class reflects on the industry

BY CHARITY THOMPSON of the VBJ March 6th, 2009

While Vancouver's School of Piano Technology for the Blind marked its 60th anniversary in February, one of its first graduates also marked his 60th year working as a visually impaired piano technician.

Ken Serviss was a member of the school's first graduating class in 1949, and has continued as a piano technician in Vancouver while working or volunteering for the school for the better part of six decades.

"To be successful as a manager and a leader you need to understand the business you're in and the people you're working with," said Len Leger, the school's executive director. "Ken understands this business better than anyone I know."

In the beginning

Serviss has been visually impaired since birth and got his first pair of glasses at age 2. These days he's legally blind, but retains some vision. In the 1940s, Serviss began to learn piano tuning at the Washington State School for the Blind, where the late Emil Fries taught before founding today's School of Piano

Technology for the Blind. "Three or four of us (WSSB students) agreed that if Emil started a school, we Com with him, Serviss said.



Ken Serviss tunes a piano at the School of Piano Technology for the Blind. He was one of the school's first students in 1949 and was later its president.

Serviss still works as an independent piano tuner in Vancouver.

In the school's early days, students ate lunch on piano benches and worked in a crowded, run-down building near its current location at 2510 E. Evergreen Blvd. They helped Fries with building maintenance to minimize overhead costs.

"It was roughing it to some extent, but we didn't see it as that," Serviss said. "I suppose by modern standards it was pretty crude."

Serviss joined the school staff in 1966 and became a jack of all trades, working as director of instruction while handling building maintenance and servicing and selling pianos. In 1978, he became president of the school, equivalent to today's executive director position.

Serviss retired from the school in 2001 and continues as adjunct faculty while running his own business as a piano technician. He has known some of his customers 50 years.

"It's been a profession that has stood with me all these years," Serviss said. "I've never missed a day's pay or been on unemployment."

Creating opportunity

Today the school is accredited with a two-year curriculum that produces certified piano technicians. It is the only school of its kind that remains in the world, leaders said, and it is one of the few to ever offer training in piano repair along with tuning.

"Emil's approach was to do tuning and repair," Serviss said. "That's why we're still in business today."

The school is now at capacity with eight students and three faculty. It has trained more than 300 students from 36 states and 14 countries, tuning more than 56,000 pianos locally.

"For a student to come here means they've got to uproot themselves and even their families," Serviss said. "They learn independence and a degree of confidence they very seldom learn (otherwise)."

Prospective students participate in career exploration and skills evaluation before admission. The workshop includes tests of hearing, spatial reasoning and mechanical and musical aptitude. About one-third of applicants don't qualify, Leger said.

About 67 percent of the school's graduates have started small businesses while others work for music stores, universities, school districts and churches.

The school's leaders are considering expanding into other types of vocational training in response to the blind adult community's chronically high unemployment rate, which was 81 percent in 2004, according to the National Center for Policy Research. Thirteen percent live in poverty in the Western states, and 40 percent don't finish high school.

"We want to be able to accept more students and help more people find careers and live independent lives," Leger said.

Changing perceptions

Piano technology is often seen as a stereotypical path for the blind, Serviss said, but those workers make up less than 2 percent of the industry.

Meanwhile, the school carries the stigma of many vocational programs as being less valuable than academic training.

"Teachers and counselors want their students to have the best and don't want to deny them opportunities, and not every student wants to take academic courses," Leger said. "Our students prefer to come and work with their hands to make a living."

Early in his career, Serviss considered working as a vocational counselor until he learned that he would make more money as a piano technician.

Piano tuners typically charge \$100 per tuning and can do up to four tunings per day, Leger said. When tuning is slow, technicians often do repairs.

"It's a good-paying profession if it's managed right and operated as a business," Serviss said. "It takes a pretty well-rounded individual to be a successful piano tuner, whether you're sighted or not."

A changing industry

Today, technology has made blind piano technicians more capable of success and independence than ever before, Serviss said.

Blind piano technicians work with sighted assistants who drive them to appointments, help with tuning and repair work and schedule future appointments.

"How they handle (transportation) ultimately determines the success of their business," Serviss said.

In the past, assistants also wrote out bills for blind technicians' services, but Leger said new Braille PDAs with printers and databases allow many technicians to do that work themselves.

"It's a really enabling thing for a blind person to be able to (write up) their own bill," Leger said.

Other technologies used in any profession include software that gives an audio reading of text on a computer screen, enlarges type on a screen or scans and gives audio readings of printed materials.

Sales of new pianos have declined significantly since the advent of the electronic keyboard. New piano sales have fallen steadily since 1979, from 270,600 nationally, to 53, 870 in 2007, according to the Blue Book of pianos.

While new piano sales are down, Leger said sales of used instruments are taking off because of websites such as Craigslist and eBay.

"The sale of pianos between private parties is huge," Leger said. "What's the first thing you do with a used piano? You tune it or you repair it. There's a huge opportunity for students to capitalize on that."

"As long as parents want to see their children learn to play the piano, there will be a market for this business," Serviss said.

Typical work for the blind and visually impaired includes:

- Piano technology
- Massage therapy
- Upholstery
- Mechanics
- Office assistance
- Accounting
- Retail store management
- Database administration
- Stockbrokerage
- Library science
- Teaching
- Counseling
- Occupational therapy
- Language translation
- Software design
- Blind advocacy leadership

Source: Washington State Department of Services for the Blind

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