

## GUEST COLUMN

# About Brad Schoener, beloved Music Man of Upper Darby

By Joseph Batory  
Times Guest Columnist

He died well before his time. But he left behind the legacy of a giant. He was a music genius who used his artistic talent to touch lives. He is remembered as the "Beloved Music Man of Upper Darby." And that is why the memory of Brad Schoener lives on and will never be forgotten.

I first met Brad Schoener in my early years as the Upper Darby School District superintendent. Brad was a young music teacher, just one among many great ones in the Upper Darby School District. But Brad stood out in his own unique way. To begin, he had long hair down his back. He could play multiple instruments well and he composed music. And he bubbled over with joie de vivre, an exuberance for life. Young people absorbed his energy. So Brad became a Pied Piper of Music, which he spread to many hundreds, if not thousands, of Upper Darby students.

I have many memories of Brad Schoener, but four of them best explain why he was so exemplary:

▪ My first recollection is of Brad in a white tuxedo

with tails. Before him was an orchestra of several hundred elementary-age students. And before a "sold out" audience at the Upper Darby Performing Arts Center, Brad did his maestro bit, leading these young student musicians in a wonderful performance of a classical piece that "brought the house down."

▪ My second recollection is of Brad teaching an elementary music class in the lobby of the Stonehurst Hills School. Even though the school was under piecemeal construction during the school year, nothing was going to interrupt Brad's music instruction. It would have been normal for anyone at this school to complain about the disruption. But that was never Brad. So anyone passing through the school lobby, including me, was invited to become part of his in-the-lobby music class and interact with his kids.

▪ My third memory is that Brad developed the instrumental music skills of two fifth graders to a very high level and managed to get them invited to a young musicians performance at New York's Carnegie Hall. Brad chaperoned the students and was housed over-



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The author at the grave of Brad Schoener, the beloved 'Music Man of Upper Darby.'

night in a nice hotel. Brad soon found out that one of America's musical geniuses, Wynton Marsalis, was staying at the same hotel. So Brad (being Brad) slipped a note under the door of Wynton Marsalis's room. And this resulted in two 10 year-old-Upper Darby kids getting the experience of a lifetime, a music tutorial

from the gracious and caring Wynton Marsalis.

▪ My fourth reminiscence of Brad was when he came to my office, telling me: "Boss, I have an idea!" He was going to lead the largest marching band ever into Veterans Stadium before a Phillies game. I could easily have just dismissed Brad's wild idea - but be-

ing Upper Darby's brilliant school leader (only kidding) - I just directed Brad to come back with a plan (I expected that this would never happen). Surprisingly, Brad returned the next day with a detailed outline for his parade. And a few weeks later, the largest marching band ever (about 900 participants) - students from all levels, alumni, parents, graduates, faculty - marched into The Vet before a Phillies game. The only reason this accomplishment was not entered into the Guinness World Books of Records is that no one had ever done anything like this so there was no way to measure how big an achievement this was.

The sad part of this story is that Brad contracted cancer and his health was gradually weakened. As an Upper Darby teacher, he had never missed school so he had accumulated tons of sick leave. When I watched his body slowly deteriorate, I encouraged Brad to take some time off and rest whenever he needed to. But Brad told me point blank: "My life is about my kids and the music I inspire in them. And nothing should interrupt this."

Brad Schoener died in 2009. He was only 47 years old. But Brad lives on through the Schoener Music Fund, which will celebrate 11 years of serving Upper Darby's young people when the Brad Schoener Festival of Upper Darby Arts occurs on Saturday, May 18 (10 a.m.-3 p.m.). Local artisans, crafters, musical performances, and celebrations of cultural diversity will highlight the day along with a 5K Walk/Run through Arlington Cemetery.

Last year's Schoener Festival raised \$20,000 via this one-day event and the goal for this year is to net \$50,000. The summer Schoener Music Camp, musical instruments for children in need, private music lessons, and grants to teachers for music and art enhancement projects are just parts of what the Schoener Memorial has financed. The beneficiaries ... the young people of Upper Darby.

Somewhere in the great beyond, the great one, Brad Schoener is smiling broadly.

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