

COMMUNITY ARCHIVE: COVID-19 EXPERIENCES ORAL HISTORIES

Adam Gumbrecht Interview

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Virtual Meeting, Eaton Rapids, Michigan

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Adam Gumbrecht Interview

ROBYN PIERCE: My name is Robyn Pierce working in conjunction with the Reuther Library at Wayne State University. Today's date is November 14th, 2020. This interview is of Adam Gumbrecht about the effects of COVID on his ability to work. The interview will go into detail about their job as a public school teacher, both before and after the shelter-in-place order was issued. Adam lives in Eaton Rapids, and works at a public school. This interview will be recorded remotely and will be housed at the Reuther Library, which is part of Wayne State University.

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Thank you so much for your time. And then I always start out with, do you have an affiliation with Wayne State University?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: No, I do not. [00:01:10]

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay. So, let's talk about—let's get a good baseline of what being a teacher in your role looked like before COVID hit.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Sure. My day is a little bit unusual maybe compared to what I think of as the average teacher—if there is such a thing—in that I'm not exclusively working with one grade level or even in one building. My normal day would consist of working with either third and or fourth grade students—actually third, fourth, and fifth grade students in the mornings. And in the afternoon, I would move over and be working with high school students, 9 through 12. So right away that is maybe a little bit unusual. [00:02:01]

I have a lot of outside-the-school-day responsibilities that are directly tied to my position. Since I am a music teacher and have performing ensembles, we would have groups practicing after

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school. Even some of that would be student-led, some of that would be led by me. I would have involvement with maybe the school plays in a musical capacity or just, you know, doing concerts, booster meetings, fundraising. You know, all of the fun things. But there were certainly—was not for me just a—show up at this time because that's when the contract says I show up, and then leave at this time because that's when the contract says I can leave. I had responsibilities outside the school day, in addition to my normal class loads. How's that? That okay? [00:03:11]

ROBYN PIERCE: That's good. Yes. I would also like to talk about the marching band aspect of it, because I think that's very unique.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yes.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, prior to COVID. Let's talk about that.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Sure. Our marching band, like a lot of other marching bands in the state, we do a summer band camp. We would often, not always, have some other summer rehearsals leading up to band camp. That always kind of depended a little bit on the specifics of the timing and the year. There were other variables that went into that. Within our community we would typically have a volunteer performance on July 4th in the community. That is something that – it's July 4th, it's a national holiday so I stopped short of requiring kids to show up because I think that's kind of bogus to require kids to show up on a national holiday like that. [00:4:14] But we've been pretty good with being able to get a volunteer group for that. We would have our band camp typically in either late July or early August and that's a full week of work, very long days. Twelve hours I would say would be the normal day. We would have instructors come in, paid instructors either from local universities or other people just within the profession.

After our full week of band camp—which in our community we would have in the neighborhood of 80 to 90 kids at or near 100% attendance. We've been very blessed in that we are not plagued with some of the absenteeism that you might see in more rural communities, or other places. [00:05:10] After our week of band camp we—again depending on the specifics

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of the schedule, we would typically have one evening rehearsal a week, and that would actually run up basically through the end of football season, so end of October-ish. So that would carry on from after our band camp in the summer up until the end of the season. So even during the school year.

During the school year, our marching band has a very active performance schedule. Of course we perform at all of the home football games. But we also perform at local parades, not just within our own community but within neighboring communities as well. One year I did the math and over the course of a school year our high school band would average about one performance a week. [00:06:09] But (recording interruption) is heavily, heavily loaded at the front. Our marching band by far has the most active performance schedule within our band program throughout the year. So once we get out of football season, the performance schedule slows down to what I think of a normal schedule with, you know, six weeks, eight weeks, you have a concert. Six weeks, eight weeks, you have a concert. That sort of thing. I'm also getting a little blurb that says my internet connection is unstable so hopefully that maintains and if I get cut off, I will come back.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay, I've gotten it a couple times too. It seems it's been bad out here lately.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Awesome. Yes, it's a very active schedule. We are not a competitive group. There are, within the state of Michigan, there are several circuits, for lack of a better term. We are not in any of the competitive circuits and actually within our geographical (recording interruption) [00:07:11] there's not a lot of actually competitive groups. Our schedule is fairly average when compared to the other groups in the region, maybe a little bit heavier just because we're a little bit more active in some of the parades than others, but I would not say obscenely above average or anything like that.

ROBYN PIERCE: So—

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yes.

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ROBYN PIERCE: When you're planning out concerts and marching band music and the movements of the marching band, you're starting six, eight months out?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Oh easily. Officially, I usually get things going in January, February, that's the—it kind of a snowballs. It starts moving slowly and as we get closer, things ramp up. [00:08:11] But I'll start things in January or February, securing facilities or locking down instructors to make sure I have all of them lined up. I might not even know what we're actually performing yet, but I know it's going to happen at this time. I will start our performance calendar. I typically release the performance calendar for the following school year before we hit summer break of the previous school year. So, I have to make sure all of those forms are sent in, all of the applications are done.

I have to make sure I know the football schedule. I actually normally start talking to the athletic director about the next year's football schedule during the current football year, because I will start to think in terms of that. [00:09:11] So, for example, if we have—usually you only have four or five home games a season, not including any playoffs. Sometimes you might get six, but usually it's going to be four or five. And when those four or five home games happen in the schedule, happen in the season, make a difference for how I plan everything in the show. So, if we only have four home games but three of them are in September, I have to make sure that our performance is constructed in such a way that we can be successful with it very quickly because we're not going to have the time that we might have. So that might mean, I hate to use the term, an “easier” show, but an easier show to put together in a shorter time frame versus a schedule where the games are all later in October. [00:10:11] If the games are all later in October, well we can plan maybe a little bit a more intricate show because we're going to have a lot more time before we have to unveil it. So, I actually start talking to the athletic director about that during, you know, the next year's schedule during the current football season even though I'm not really planning anything. It's one of those things I just kind of put in the memory bank. I will start—January, February I start to get all the things more officially locked down.

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February, March is when I start thinking about the music, and the music is the X factor for me. Sometimes it will take me forever to select a piece of music, a piece, to select the entire program. Sometimes it takes me just a week or two. It really, really just depends on kind of where I wind up going creatively. [00:11:12] I've tried to actually make it easier on myself over the years. In my earlier days of teaching, and I just said, No, we can do anything, everything is available. And it would take me forever to figure out what we were doing because I was just giving myself too many options. As the years went on, I've kind of limited my own options which helps me in the process. I try to start planning that early just because (recording interruption) [00:11:43] take me a long time to figure out. So, I will start thinking about that in, at least February or March, even though maybe just for fun I start thinking of it earlier. But I will start thinking of it in February, March just so that I can ultimately have something figured out. In my perfect world I want to have everything squared away by spring break, because once spring break finishes, I'm already working on next year. You know, we still have spring concerts and awards banquets to finish up this year. But I am full blown preparing for the next year at that point. So if I can have everything finished, planned by spring break, that really helps me out.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, thinking back to last school year—started school like normal, planning everything like crazy. And then March 10 was our first confirmed case in Michigan, and I think it was the fourteenth that you guys shut the schools? [00:12:41]

ADAM GUMBRECHT: I want to say it was the thirteenth. It might have been the fourteenth though. It was a Friday. Yes, it was the thirteenth, thirteenth was our last day.

ROBYN PIERCE: I'm sorry. Up until that point, from like the beginning of the year to March, you're going along like normal. Did you guys have any inclination that this was going to happen?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Officially no. There was no anything. I personally had a feeling of what might happen. And while I did have things planned for the following year, I actually had our performance calendar pretty much set at that point, which is not unusual. I can typically have

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the performance calendar squared away even though it's only March, I pretty much know when most things are going to happen. [00:13:45] That was done. I had started thinking about music, however I didn't really go full speed ahead with it like I normally would have because I kind of felt that there was something in the air about this. And I did not want to dive in too heavily and then be locked in. Now ultimately I did have a Plan A, which, as I said, I never really got too committed to.

And then I did move to a Plan B, and I was pretty set on my Plan B. I thought, Okay, this is reasonable, this is going to be fine. The thing is though, my Plan B was predicated on the idea that we would be back relatively normal in the fall. [00:14:47] The idea behind my Plan B was that we probably wouldn't have a lot of time to prepare, so I wouldn't have the preparation that I might have in a normal year. But for the most part, the actual school year would be relatively normal, and that one I definitely committed to. I purchased the music. I do not write the drill for our band; we contract that out. A friend of mine, he's written the drill for me ever since I started teaching. So, he's like (recording interruption) [00:15:25] a relationship and so I had already spoken to him. I said, Okay, here's what we're doing, blah-blah-blah-blah-blah.

And as we got closer and things did get better, right, in our state? When we were in the neighborhood of July 4, when we were kind of at what I'll call the—in a good way—the lowest point. I was feeling pretty good. And I would actually say that's the moment where I actually, I had all of this music and all these plans, and that's the moment where I actually started—Okay, we're going to go. I'm going to send this out to these people and we're going to make it happen.

Then things started moving not in the direction that we really needed them to see. [00:16:19] I started to realize that my Plan B might not even be the best. So, I actually scrapped Plan B. Now truth be told, I'm just keeping Plan B, and Plan B is going to become next year's Plan A. So I'm just way ahead now, that's what I'm thinking of it as. But I moved into Plan C, which was still a good plan, I'm still happy with it. But honestly even Plan C did not come to fruition.

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So, with regards to band camp, band camp was probably the hardest thing, on a number of levels. One, band camp is what I use, even though it's a summer activity, that's where I really establish the fundamentals of what will be my curriculum. And so I lost that. [00:17:19]

Ultimately, I did lose that. But, at the time, what I was really trying to figure out was, how do I still run band camp. The local band directors—because band directors talk—we all got together and we're all sharing ideas. I stole some ideas from other people. But ultimately, I was very confident in the setup that we had. It was more than what some of the other schools around us were doing, but I felt really good about it. I really did. It was maybe not until a week or two before, when we were scheduled to begin and things really kind of started going up higher and I just had to stop and say, I'm not willing to take the chance. I'm just not willing to do it. It's the hardest decision that I've ever had to make with regards to band camp. [00:18:18] We didn't cancel it outright, but we did a significant adjustment. I was confident with that adjustment. It's not what any of us wanted, but I was still confident in the experience that we were going to offer was going to be safer than anything else. And while I cannot speak for my colleagues within the school district, because it's not like I was in on those planning for things like athletics and whatnot, I was pretty confident that we were going to be the safest thing happening.

Now, at the same time, this is where (recording interruption) [00:19:05] school board was starting to see the writing on the wall that, wait a minute, we might have some real problems here for the beginning of our school year. And to be clear, I cannot speak in any capacity for the school board, so this is all my own perception. But, coincidentally, during our week of extremely modified band camp, there was a school board meeting. I have no problem being vocal at a school board meeting and speaking from the perspective of the teacher and a union member and all of those things. I have no problem voicing my opinion. And I did. I voiced my opinion and I said, this is what I believe we should do with our school year. And I will admit that it does give the impression of talking out of both sides of my mouth because, on the one hand, I am running a highly-modified—but I'm running what I'm calling a band camp, at the same time that I'm saying to the board that it's not safe to reopen schools. [00:20:20]

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ROBYN PIERCE: But to be fair, your band camp was outside, I assume.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yes, it was outside, and this is the distinction that I think with a topic that is so polarizing and causes such strong emotions, the subtlety of detail gets lost on a lot of people. You're either A or you're B, you know. It's black or white. And it's like, man, it's not just that. There's a continuum here. And something that I had said from the start is that operating a school is nothing like operating anything outside the school day. Do I personally think that it is safe to be running football right now? I don't. I do not think that it is safe to be running football right now. That is the high contact sport in the fall. [00:21:22] But I don't think it's fair to say that all athletics should probably stop, either. Singles tennis is a lot different than football. I was not a fan of the blanket statements of, Nope, cancel all athletics. Like, no I think that's ridiculous, just like I think (recording interruption) [00:21:48] to say that—recognizing my own bias here—that it's ridiculous for me to cancel my band camp while at the same time saying that it's not safe to run school. Because they're different animals. I can run band camp outside with small numbers, distanced, masked, all the things that you can't really do in the school setting when you put 7 to 800 kids in a building and say, it's the same thing. I don't believe it's the same thing at all.

So, at any rate I went to that school board meeting and I was vocal about it. After that school board meeting, I received an email/phone call from some people higher up the food chain than me, not telling me to cancel band camp, but very strongly insinuating that I should. [00:22:54] And ultimately, I decided that I was going to cancel it because I didn't want to put students in a situation where they were going to be in the middle of a scene. Where I'm going to be in the middle of teaching band camp and somebody else shows up and starts yelling at me for it.

ROBYN PIERCE: Right.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Kids don't need to be around that. They don't need to see that. I did make that decision.

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ROBYN PIERCE: When school shut down and you had to go home, how did teaching look like, last year?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: At first there wasn't any, right? We had, in our district, we had a couple weeks, several weeks, of just nothing because we weren't prepared for this. As a district, nobody was really prepared for it. But I think we did spend a lot of time kind of sitting around, just kind of waiting, which I can understand. [00:23:53] The amount of time and effort that goes into trying to plan for a virtual/remote school setting is significant, and to invest all of that time and effort only to find out two weeks later, Hey we're coming back? And I think everybody thought it was temporary, right?

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: I think everybody thought, okay we're going to shut down for a couple weeks. We'll let this thing kind of blow through and then we'll all be back. And I think a lot of us were really just thinking of it as an extended spring break, right? And then actual spring break rolled around and passed, and we were still in the same situation. So, when we came back, when we decided we were going to be virtual school, speaking not in an official capacity, it wasn't school. [00:24:53] It wasn't school in any way shape or form that we knew it to be. It was us just trying to get across the finish line. If what happened last March 13—if it had been November 13 or December 13, I think we would have attacked this completely differently. But it was March, and the end of the school year is in sight. At that point I think there is an attitude of, Oh my God, we just need to finish this year. It doesn't matter, we just need to finish this year. And we all did what we could. [00:25:40] There were some mixed messages, as far as what you're hearing from the state versus what you might be hearing from the powers that be within your own school district: Yes, you can grade things, No, you cannot grade things, Yes, you can give homework. No, no homework. Yes, you can fail kids. No, nobody fails anything. That took some time to figure out as well. And ultimately, I think within our own school district we all just did what our principals told us to do. We just had to put faith in that what our

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principals and our administration was telling us was going to be correct, so that's what we did. But it was very much just what can we do to just finish this year. [00:26:26.0]

ROBYN PIERCE: What kind of equipment did you take, or already have, that you utilized to help you teach last year?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: For me personally, what I did—again on March 13th and not knowing what would happen, but also being a paranoid individual—I had actually already brought a few things home with me. I did have to use a personal computer. That is something that I just used. At this point now our school district has provided us with laptops to use at home if needed. So, I do have my school laptop, but at the time I was using my personal laptop. If I did not have one, that would have been a problem. But I brought home—I made sure I had my instrument. I made sure I had my music stand. [00:27:26] I just brought a stack of music with me, which is really what I do anytime I'm going to be out of school for a while, because my thought is, Well I'm going to get all these things done. So I just grab a stack of music and brought it home. I brought home my good microphone, which yeah—here we go, right? [shows microphone] There we go.

ROBYN PIERCE: Nice.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yes, to me, my recording quality matters. It's difficult for me to teach to students if I'm speaking to them on a microphone that distorts my sound, or anything like that. It's hard for them. And so, this is my own personal microphone, but I've long kept it at school because that's where I was using it the most. But I brought it home. I thought, Nope, I think I'm going to need this. So I brought it home and just made sure I had that. Really that's all I needed. I needed my microphones, I needed my instruments, I needed some music, and for all my other technological needs, I had those all on my personal laptop already. So, that wasn't a big change for me. [00:28:41]

ROBYN PIERCE: Timeline wise—so now this school year, do you feel like you're more prepared and you're in a swing of things?

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ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yes, definitely. You know, as prepared as one can be. I think everybody in the teaching profession who has gone through/is going through this, I think everybody just kind of viewed last spring as the dry run, you know. It's your parents throwing you off the end of the dock and saying, Swim. And you just, you figure it out. And it's not graceful or pretty or anything, but you keep your head above water and you just try not to drown. Then you take the summer to actually like, How do I swim. What do I need to do? [00:29:41] And so, this fall—again keeping in mind that there was still a lot of back and forth, and a lot of time spent just waiting for school districts (recording interruption) [00:29:54] state to just make a call. Just, please just tell me what we're doing so I can figure out what I'm doing. Because we had the three plans in front of us. Face-to-face, hybrid, which at the time I think we were all calling the "West Bloomfield model," because West Bloomfield, I think they were the first district, at least in our state, to roll out a plan and say, this is what we're doing. And now we all look at that as hybrid teaching or what we all think of it. But, at the time we were all calling it the "West Bloomfield model." Or all-remote teaching. And, for me, each of those plans looks extremely different. Even though the recommendation to us was approach all of your plans as if you're going to be teaching remotely and then any time you get face-to-face is just kind of bonus time. [00:30:52] That doesn't work for me because the plans—not the curriculum necessarily, but definitely the delivery of the curriculum—changes drastically from in-person to remote. I've done an online degree program. It was a few years ago now, but I know what that was like. I at least had that experience to draw on and—sorry, I lost my train of thought here.

ROBYN PIERCE: That's okay.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: All three plans, online degree program, oh man—

ROBYN PIERCE: So you're maybe at a better platform to start learning how to teach this, because you had some experience? [00:31:43]

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yeah. I thought through what I would do. When the decision was finally made to be remote, I wasn't happy about the decision on some levels, but it was the right

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decision. And I was happy that it was finally made, at the very least. And so I made my plans. I was confident with my plans. For the most part, I have stuck with my original plan through our first trimester of school. I did make some changes as we went, but most of them were behind-the-scenes changes on my end, not necessarily in what was happening with the students.

[00:32:35] For the second trimester that we will be starting after Thanksgiving, it's a little bit back at square one, for a few reasons. One, we don't know how long we're going to be remote. Originally, our plan was that we were going to be back in a hybrid on November 30th. And that has changed.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, just to interject, I want to just clear for whoever's watching this in whatever year they watch this. Hybrid is, half of the school would go for two days a week face-to-face, be at home for the rest of the time. The other half would go face-to-face two opposite days of them, and one day of the week the whole school would be closed, is that correct?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Correct. Yes.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay, sorry.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: No, no good. You got to spell it out for the future folk.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yup. [00:33:22]

ADAM GUMBRECHT: We're in this situation where we had planned to come back in a hybrid, basically from Thanksgiving to Christmas, and then in January, we would be back in a face-to-face, what we call a four-and-one, where we would have kids, all kids, in school four days a week. Our district was making the choice to maintain one day of virtual learning, with the expectation that we would probably be going virtual at some point anyway, so let's keep those skills handy. Well, the virus has unsurprisingly not suddenly gotten better, and our school board has now made the decision that we are going to extend remote learning at least through the end of the calendar year. [00:34:15]

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So, I'm a little bit back at square one for a couple reasons. One, my class changes after the first trimester. First trimester, technically the high school class that I have on the books is marching band. Now, we didn't do any actual marching, but it did give me more of a focus in what I was going to do. The fact that it was marching band meant, Okay, that means I'm going to do these types of things. When we hit our second trimester, that is traditionally when we split into what we call concert season. My class lists are going to change, it's going to be all the same students, but now they're going to be mixed up differently. And I don't have that marching band piece to focus on. It's a double-edged sword. For me, concert season is usually (recording interruption) [00:35:24] Hooray, I can do whatever I want. But then it comes back to, Oh my God, I can do whatever I want. That means I have to think, I have to reinvent the wheel here. And that's just normal. That's a normal thing that I have to figure out. But now I also have to figure out, Okay I have to do this, I at least have to do this remote for a few weeks. Then what? What happens then? Like—what if we do come back on a hybrid in January—which technically, right now that is the plan, since remote learning was only extended until the end of the calendar year. That means after the calendar year ends, we should be coming back. Well, who's to say if that will actually happen or not. So, again, my plans are very, very different. I have a plan loosely in place to get me through November to December. [00:36:22]

The question is—is that a practice run for what I'm going to have to do in January for more extended remote learning, or is it just something I'm doing to get through this time? Something else that I have changed, or will be changing I guess, is I also surveyed all the students and basically just asked them, Hey, first trimester, what worked? What didn't work? From the students—because it's easy for me as the teacher to sit back and say, man I came up with some awesome stuff. I am so great. That's great teaching I just did. But if all the kids hate it, it doesn't really matter. So, I surveyed the kids and basically just asked them, what did you like, what didn't you like? What worked, what didn't work? And unsurprisingly, the responses are all over the map. Half the kids say, I hated Project A, and the other half of kids, I loved Project A. [00:37:22]

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But there are some things in there that are very worthwhile for me. An easy one that comes to mind is during the first trimester my assignments schedule for the students was fairly predictable. Every Tuesday was this, every Wednesday was this, every Thursday was this, or at least I tried to make it that way. My due dates or rather my due times were different. So, Tuesday's assignment was always due by noon. Wednesday's assignment was due by noon. Wednesday's assignment could be turned in any time. Thursday's assignment was due by the end of the class period. And that was something that I didn't think of from the student point of view. They're trying to do this with every class. I just have to do it with my classes. [00:38:14] A couple kids made the comment on the survey that, like, it was hard to keep track of when the projects were due just because—well they knew the day. They would get mixed up on the time. So, something I have already decided for next trimester, it's just going to be universal due times, with the exception of Wednesdays because Wednesday is an all asynchronous day. I'm going to keep like, any time Wednesday is going to be fine, just if it's turned (recording interruption) [00:38:47] in by 11:59 on Wednesday, fine. But, my regular days, I'm just going to keep the same times. That's an easy example, but that's something that I'm going to change based on student responses. I'm still going through the feedback because some of them have a lot of things to say about my teaching.

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: And that's good, it's good because I'm going to learn something and I'm going to try to make it better for them.

ROBYN PIERCE: Well, good. So, how many concert bands do you have?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: We have two concert bands.

ROBYN PIERCE: Okay. [00:39:20]

ADAM GUMBRECHT: One thing that changed for my schedule specifically is usually during the first trimester at school, I have all my marching band students in one class period. I have one

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class period with 90 kids in it. I only teach two class periods at the high school, because my morning is with the younger kids. So, at the high school, I have all the afternoon classes, so I have fourth and fifth hour. One of those is marching band, and the other one is usually just a music appreciation class, which is just a generic anybody comes to the class. Well, when we were preparing schedules during the summer, I approached the guidance office and administration. I remember at the time we were considering coming back in a hybrid schedule of some kind. And I said, look, there's no way about this. There's no way we can put 90 kids in one class, even in a hybrid, and do anything remotely safe. [00:40:27] And so, I proposed the idea of splitting the marching band into two class periods, which is what we wound up doing. Which is good because I couldn't have gotten all of them to be in one Zoom [videoconferencing software] session at the same time anyway.

ROBYN PIERCE: Could you imagine?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: My system, at least, it wouldn't have been able to handle it. One thing that was a definite change for me this year, at least, is that we just cut music appreciation for this year. Said, Nope, we're just not even offering it. Forget it. Normally though, I have the entire marching band in one section and then after Thanksgiving, which is our traditional time for the second trimester, (recording interruption) [00:41:10] the marching band splits into two concert bands that are ability-based. There's an audition for the top group, and anybody who chooses not to audition, does not pass the audition, is in the second group. It is often separated by grade, which makes sense. Your more experienced students are going to just have the better chance at being more advanced players. I have one class period that is mostly all freshman, a lot of sophomores, some juniors, and a couple seniors, and then I have my advanced group which is just the opposite. It's most of the seniors, a lot of juniors and so on.

ROBYN PIERCE: Right.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: But those would be our concert bands.

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ROBYN PIERCE: So, then the whole time, like all of that you just spoke of, you are also teaching the lower grades in the mornings over Zoom as well.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Correct. Yes, I have my my third and fourth grade students, the general music students. And then fifth grade would be our beginning band program, which I co-teach with our middle school band director. [00:42:23] We split—we take the entire group of fifth grade band students, and I take half and she takes half, and we teach our groups. And that—it's a little bit more predictable because it doesn't have any of the performance aspects to it that the high school does. My third and fourth grade students, that one was hard in last spring, you know. I've been talking about high school the whole time because that's the big thing that everybody sees, but the elementary students were hard. They're not as prepared to make that kind of switch. The high school students aren't prepared to make that kind of switch. We like to pretend they are because they're, you know, high school students, but you know. How many times in your life are you really walking around saying, like, Man those high school kids are all so mature and capable of making great decisions.

ROBYN PIERCE: I say that all the time. [00:43:24]

ADAM GUMBRECHT: The elementary kids super-struggled. And in fact, (recording interruption) [00:43:35] we were just told like, Look, maybe they come to class and maybe they don't. It is what it is. The fifth grade band students that we had last spring, we had no more contact with them. It was just not going to happen, and that is something that there are going to be—we're not going to see the effects of that at the high school for several years. But, in about four or so years, when those kids make it to the high school, I can almost promise you that somebody is going to say to me, Hey, why does that class seem so small? Or something like that. It's like, Well, it's because when they were first starting we just disappeared. [00:44:33] And we left them hanging. I'm not looking forward to that day. At the same time, young kids are resilient. Maybe in the years that it takes them to get to the high school, they will make up that difference. That is possible. But, from my vantage point as the high school teacher, all I can really do is sit back and wait and see.

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ROBYN PIERCE: Right.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: But yes. At the same time that I'm doing all of that stuff, I'm also doing the elementary program.

ROBYN PIERCE: So, the fifth-grade band is, I'm asking, is it you introducing them to instruments that they will then play throughout their school career and teaching them how to play those subsequent instruments?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: That's the idea, yes.

ROBYN PIERCE: How do you do that on Zoom?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Um, you don't. This year we are not offering beginning band. [00:45:31]

ROBYN PIERCE: Oh.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yeah, we're just not offering it, for logistical reasons more so than anything else.

ROBYN PIERCE: Right.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: During the summer, start of the school year—again, when we were kind of at first thinking that we would have kids back in person, we—the school district did not know how safe that would be. I think that—we're still learning a lot about this virus, right? We learn more every day. But I think that was the time where people were starting to say, Hey, maybe this is airborne. [00:46:17] There was at least one, what's known as the "super-spreader" event, I want to say it was in the state of Washington and it was a choir. I might be off on that location, but it was definitely a choir, it was a church choir. There was somebody who went to a church choir practice who was sick, and then a bunch of people got sick. And at that point there were a lot of alarm bells for some people, saying, Hey, nobody can sing. Don't play instruments, because we're all going to get COVID-19 because you're playing instruments. It is reasonable to explore those things to make sure things are going to be safe.

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At the same time, because it's my field, I'm reading the articles about that, and yes, it is true to say that one sick person went to a choir practice (recording interruption) [00:47:21], a bunch of other people got sick. But nobody talks about the fact that there was a literal buffet table at that choir practice, and they were all eating off the same trays. So was it the singing, or was it the fact that everybody wanted the same lemon bars? I don't know.

But also, during the summer there are a couple schools, a couple research facilities that are actually looking into the science of this. I'm not talking about the guy on YouTube who gets his trumpet out and tries to blow out a candle and says, See, no air comes through, it's fine. We're talking about people actually doing, they're doing the hard science. That organization/ organizations, they released recommendations and said, These are the things that you need to do if you want to make school music in a safer environment. [00:48:20] It's a real scientific study, right? So, it needs to be peer reviewed and all of those things, and that takes time. So the organizations doing these studies, they were releasing the data pretty much in real time so it wasn't having the chance.

And will it be peer reviewed and all those things? Yes, of course it will. But we wanted that data now, even if it was preliminary. And so they did, they released the data and they said, Okay, here's the data. Here's what you need to do to play instruments safely. And then, of course as time went on, they would crunch more numbers and then they would say, Okay, here's the second round of data and here's our amended recommendations. And actually they just released the third round of it a few days ago. [00:49:15] So I of course am hanging on, waiting for the first round of data to release during the summer. And when that first round of data releases, I'm looking at that going, Trying to do this with fifth grade students is going to be a nightmare. An absolute nightmare. And I just do not see a way that we can do this in person safely with fifth graders.

ROBYN PIERCE: Right.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Not to mention the fact that we typically do a rental program for beginning instruments. There's no way that we could do a rental program. The rental program

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is a perfect breeding ground for a super-spreader event. It's a lot of people in a small space, and everybody's kind of going around and there's things making noise and whatever. There's no way it could happen. [00:50:14] So we did make the executive decision and just say, We're not going to do fifth grade band this year. Or officially the decision was, We're not doing it at the beginning of the school year. We did leave the window open and just kind of said, well, maybe if we're back like normal in January, maybe we could start then. That's not going to happen, so no. We're just not doing it this year. As a result, that did change how we had to structure our elementary offerings. Typically, we do not actually have a fifth grade general music class. All fifth grade students have to do band or choir. That's their music offering. Since we were not doing band or choir, now we had to introduce a fifth grade general music class, which means the way that we have, we call them encore classes—specials classes in a lot of other districts. It meant we had to change our entire schedule with regards to the encore schedule. [00:51:23] We figured it out and everything's okay. But it was a back to the drawing board moment. It wasn't just a simple as, Okay, well we're not doing band or choir so let's do this instead.

ROBYN PIERCE: Right.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: We did have to go back and kind of rethink things. And we figured it out, and it's okay and it's happening.

ROBYN PIERCE: Do you think next year you'll offer the beginner instrument classes in sixth grade to kind of cover down on the students that were missed?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yes, we have already had that conversation. When I say we, I mean myself and my middle school colleague because we represent 100% of our program, of our department. Yeah, we already expect that okay, it's just going to be sixth grade beginning band. While at the same time, we also expect next year to return to offering fifth grade beginning band. So, we're going to be offering two beginning bands at the same time. [00:52:22] Now, the way our district is set up, those students will never meet. Our kids go—sixth grade is the first year of middle school, whereas fifth grade is the end of elementary school. It's our intermediate

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building. Our fifth grade beginning students will never really interact with our sixth beginning students. But we will, as a band program in our school district, we will have two beginning band programs running at the same time.

ROBYN PIERCE: Not like you're not busy enough.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: At least, that's our plan. No, no, no, that'd be crazy. Selfish statement on my part. I only have to mess with the fifth grade ones. With the way our schedule is set up, my middle school colleague, she will be the only one with the sixth-grade kids. But it will be fine. There are a lot of schools in the state and in the nation where—that's when they traditionally, they just start in sixth grade. [00:53:22] We like starting in fifth grade, we don't want to get rid of that. It does just mean, okay, we just have to adapt at this time and it's going to be okay.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, I started in sixth grade.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yeah! And it's okay. No long-lasting damage or anything like that.

ROBYN PIERCE: I mean, not about band, but yeah. So earlier when you were talking, I wrote this down. I wondered, are you busier now, or busier before?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: It's a different kind of busy. Separate from all of this, in my personal life, we have an almost one and half year old at home now. She was born on the last day of school, what, two school years ago. [00:54:19] And so, last school year—yes, the '19/'20 school year—that was her first year of life. Obviously, that's a change for us. We're new parents and all those things. But she's still small enough that you can just kind of put her in a spot and then carry about your day, or whatever it is you're doing. And we had help. My wife was on maternity leave for a while. My mother-in-law would come in a few days a week to help out while we were at work, when she did go back. So we had help.

As she has aged a little bit—I was always going to make this decision. [00:55:17] But I've just kind of made the decision, for me in my life, that I'm not working at home anymore. I worked at home all the time before. I did, you know. Whether it was grading something, or planning, or

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whatever, I worked at home all the time. And I've just made the decision that I'm not doing that anymore. I'm not grading things on the weekends. I'm not planning new assignments; I mean I might be thinking about them but I'm not sitting down like really hashing things out. But the trade off to that is that when I am at school, I'm working a lot more efficiently than I ever have.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Because now, I say, I have to do this now, because if I don't do it now, I'm not doing it at home. [00:56:20] So that is another layer to this. It's tough for me to really say here, am I busier because of this change that, this decision that I've made regarding my personal/professional life, or because we're in a pandemic. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. When I am at school, I do feel busier. Again, it's a very different kind of busy. I'm grading things all the time. I get to school—I'm still going into the school building for classes. My wife is working from home, and I'm loud when I teach. So, it's just easier for me to go to school. [00:57:19] So, I get to school about 45 minutes before the school day starts, but I also have first hour planning period. So, I get to school an easy hour and a half, hour and forty-five before my first class of the day. And I'm just grading paper like crazy, or I'm recording lessons that are going to be taught next week, or something like that. And then I also have a firm leave time every day because I'm picking the baby up from day care. So, it doesn't matter where I am in my day, I leave at 3:30. I'm not doing as much schoolwork at home, so in that regard I guess I'm less busy. But it's not that there's less work. It's just all now being crammed into a shorter time period. [00:58:16]

ROBYN PIERCE: I've talked to a few people for interviews for this and a lot of them have said that it was really hard for them to work from home because the lines were blurred, from when they start time and how long lunch should be, and when they should be off for the day. So, it's very nice that you have something like that, you can go and structure your day in that way.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yeah, it helps me tremendously. For me, it's just a practical decision in that my wife is working from home, I need to work somewhere. I have had to do some days

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from home at the same time. Usually, that's because the baby is sick and she can't go to daycare. Those days are just fly by the seat of your pants, we're just—how do we figure this out. But no, it is very helpful for me to go into school. I don't have students coming in or anything like that, I'm still just sitting at a desk, but it does feel a little more normal, I guess. Yeah.

[00:59:30]

ROBYN PIERCE: When we get to a point when this goes back to something closer to what we feel like is normal, are you going to take a vacation?

ADAM GUMBRECHT: No, I'm not, and for a multitude of reasons. But I am so looking forward to just having them in the building again.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: I feel like all teachers want to see their kids again. All teachers want to see their kids. I don't want to take away from that, and I also don't want to, like, put my own profession or/discipline on a pedestal, but I think it's different in the arts and I think it's different especially in music because I don't have kids who are just in my class for a year.

[01:00:35] I'm not the freshman English teacher or the Algebra 2 teacher where you come through my class, Yes, hello! Here's some Algebra 2, now go away. It's not that, I don't have kids for a year. They're in the program. These are kids who I saw as fifth-graders or, in a general music sense, maybe even as third or fourth graders. In fact, the current seniors were, when I first was moved to doing elementary music, they were in fourth grade. We're now in a cycle where all of the kids in the program assuming that they started in the same school district, I have known them since third or fourth grade. [01:01:24] I just want to see them again. I just want to get together and make music, even if it's bad music. Bad music is still music, and I just can't wait to do that. I really, really cannot.

I also believe that on some level it has to be the same for a lot of professions, for people who are working at home, or just not working. It's like, Do you want a vacation? Yeah, if somebody rolled in here right now and said, Hey, I'm going to give you two tickets to the Caribbean and

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it's safe, everything is COVID-free, you're going to be 100% safe. Well yeah, I'm taking those tickets, of course. But I can't wait to get the kids back together. And it's very—it's a cliché, but man let's just get the band back together. Let's just do that. And it doesn't even matter what we do. It's going to be awesome. I can't wait for that. [01:02:34]

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah, and I think that you say, you have a lot of truth in what you're saying. I went through the band program. I met a lot of my friends that are still friends twenty years after high school in the band program. And by far, the band and choir director were my favorite teachers. We were always very excited to get together. I think that they're probably just as excited to see you.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Something that I have—we'll see. I like to think that. I like to think that. Something that I have been told and that I have since repeated is that kids in school, people in general, they're not going to remember the math test or the books they read, or quite frankly they're not going to remember the songs we played. They're not going to remember any of that. [01:03:29] But they'll remember the experiences and they'll remember how they felt when they were with those other people. And it's hard to feel bad when you're making music. I don't remember anything that I played in high school band. I don't remember any of it. But I darn well remember the people. And I remember feeling good about it. I can't wait to have that again.

ROBYN PIERCE: Yeah. That sounds really nice.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yeah, I hope so.

ROBYN PIERCE: I think that's everything, unless you have anything else that you'd like to add.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: No. I'm a talker. I threw a lot of stuff out there.

ROBYN PIERCE: I like it.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: I hope that's okay. No, I just—

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ROBYN PIERCE: Absolutely.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: It's hard on everybody for a lot of different reasons. Everybody is doing what they can to try, again cliché, to live, thrive, and survive, and just waiting for normal to come back whatever that may be.

ROBYN PIERCE: I know.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: It doesn't mean we can't try to make things as positive as we can in the meantime.

ROBYN PIERCE: Absolutely. Well, I want to thank you again for your time and if you'll hang out just a second after I stop the recording.

ADAM GUMBRECHT: Yup, of course.

ROBYN PIERCE : Thank you. [01:04:55]

End of interview