

Mike George Statement:

When we hear about so many extraordinary efforts, see photos of students in unusual rehearsal locations, including outdoors, and hear them making music together in ensembles, there can be little doubt that the young musicians, parents and staff of WYSO are dedicated to keeping music in their hearts and minds.

My name is Mike George and I've been connected to WYSO in one way or another for 54 years, including now as a member of the WYSO Board of Directors.

I want to tell you about the features of WYSO that have kept me involved over the years. First is excellent leadership. In its 54 years of existence, three music directors have led WYSO for most of those years. First, Marvin Rabin in 1966, followed soon after by James Latimer, then James Smith for 30 years, and now, Kyle Knox, who is creating an exciting story and vision for WYSO.

WYSO has also benefited from outstanding **administrative** leadership, starting with Dick Wolf, who was WYSO's first manager beginning in 1966. Another is Bruce Matthews, who was in the horn section of the first Youth Orchestra in 1966, then returned in 1980 as manager, and now is an officer of the WYSO Board of Directors. In that same first year, Dick Zellner was the assistant conductor of the Youth Symphony and, though he now lives in Evergreen, Colorado, he still volunteers today in a lead role with the Major Gifts Committee and as a WYSO board advisor

Four years ago, when the WYSO Board of Directors was presented with the opportunity to absorb the Madison Music Makers program into WYSO, it became clear that there was need to review the WYSO strategic plan, including the vision and mission statement. They were revised to read as you see them on the screen.

Vision

WYSO will expand innovative instrumental music education and performance opportunities for culturally and economically diverse youth while maintaining the artistic excellence of the core orchestral program.

Mission Statement

Enriching lives by providing transformational musical experiences and opportunities.

A word that you often see in a mission statement is the word transformational. Perhaps it is even overused these days, particularly by arts organizations.

But what I want you to know is that in WYSO's case, this is not just lip service. I'm convinced that WYSO actually transforms the lives of young musicians, family members, and the adults that are part of the artistic and administrative staff. If they give their best efforts to WYSO, WYSO gives back, and their lives are changed forever.

Three years ago while attending a WYSO performance in Mills Hall, I happened to sit next to a woman and her two children who had a family member in the percussion section. When she found out I was a WYSO board member she said, "I want to tell you

something. We live near La Crosse. If you had tried to convince me several years ago that my teenage son would wake me up at 5 am on Saturday mornings so I could drive him to Madison for a WYSO rehearsal and that he would continue to do this every Saturday morning for six years, I would have been convinced you were quite out of your mind. My teenage son has been transformed by WYSO. It is the highlight of his week.”

I recall another instance when I was in the lobby of the UW Humanities Building and the father of a senior violist told me of the shift in his daughter’s career plans. He said, “Six years ago I was convinced that my daughter would eventually be a medical researcher. Then she joined WYSO, and everything changed. Now, for the next few months we’ll be traveling around the country so she can audition and look at conservatories and music schools because she has decided that her life mission is in music.” Among the thousands of WYSO alumni who are scattered throughout the world, you can find more stories just like these.

The living history of WYSO is testament to a music organization that is actually fulfilling its stated vision and mission. How else can we explain the fact that among us are people who devote hundreds of volunteer hours to WYSO, are also current donors and have become members of the Rabin Legacy Society. Each of us has our own reasons why we stay involved and are dedicated to sustaining the WYSO story.

My own reasons revolve around some key words that are brought to life through the WYSO experience. Words such as innovation; excellence; diversity; impact; transformational; and, after what I have observed since this past March, I’m adding another word that I’m convinced applies to WYSO: resilience. When we realize that in the midst of a Pandemic WYSO has found ways to continue involving its members in music education and performance, while also finding ways to pay for it, there is no question that WYSO is a resilient and well-managed organization. That is the kind of organization I like to invest in and I imagine the same is true for you.

I help in whatever ways I can, and will continue to do so as long as I am able. What I have learned is that an investment of time or money in WYSO is a sound investment.