

Homegrown People

For the love of an instrument



Britta Arendt/Herald-Review

Although he considers himself an average player, Richard Dugan of Remer has mastered the skill of restoring and repairing string instruments.

By Britta Arendt
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From his home-based workshop in Remer, Richard Dugan works to help keep the members of the Itasca Orchestral Society sounding their best.

Of the more than 150 children who participate in IOS, nearly 50 percent of them get their instruments through Dugan. He stocks 200-250 string instruments at all times, including everything in the violin family from the tiniest violin to the big bass. And when

anyone has a string instrument in need of repair, Dugan's the person to call.

He first became interested in string instruments when he was in the fourth grade. A woman gave a viola demonstration for his class. After hearing the woman play, Dugan went home determined to learn the violin.

"I told my mother I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever heard played," remembered Dugan. "But, at that time, it was at the close of World War II and we were

poot, like everyone else. Still, my dad found a violin for \$20—which was a lot of money back then."

As soon as Dugan started playing his new violin, he discovered he had a knack for it and played through 10th grade. But since there were only two boys, including himself, in his school orchestra, and the football team was in need of players, Dugan quit playing. It wasn't until after high school, that Dugan picked up his playing again. He became involved in church work and organized a

children's band of boys and girls who played mainly hymns.

When he and his family moved to Remer 10 years ago, Dugan was in Grand Rapids one day and noticed the IOS office. He immediately decided he wanted to get involved in the program.

"In high school, I was always first chair, but I quickly realized I would probably never be that here," Dugan chuckled.

Even though he wasn't the best player, Dugan discovered he did have a talent for the craft of the violin. After traveling to Brazil on a mission trip with a bluegrass band, Dugan was amazed that there were people who had never, ever seen a violin. Yet, when the band's banjo player needed his instrument repaired, they found a repairman. "Who did a masterful job," said Dugan.

In fact, Dugan was so impressed by the repair work that he returned home with an interest in not only building but at least repairing string instruments. He had a fair amount of experience in wood-working so he challenged himself to build an instrument that was totally unique—a papier-mâché violin for his young grandson.

After finishing the red, papier-mâché violin which looked just like a regular violin and played just the same, Dugan was reading the book, "Violin Making as It Is and Was," written by Ed Herron about 125 years ago. In Herron's book which Dugan said is often referred to as the Bible of vio-

lin making, Herron includes a section on unusual violins and he describes finding the ugliest, green papier-mâché violin in a London pub.

"So I didn't really have a unique violin," said Dugan, shrugging his shoulders. "And I had to ask myself, 'Who would want a violin made by me?' Violins are like paintings, people can spend a lifetime making just one. But, to take something that's beat up and make it like new—that intrigued me."

Dugan continued giving violin lessons to children and adults, many of whom joined IOS. While supplying his students with instruments, Dugan began ordering violins from China and has since come to believe that nothing can compare to Chinese-made violins.

"Almost everything we sell is Chinese, there are no American violin manufacturers," explained Dugan who orders from the violin company, Scott Cao Violins. He said he is able to sell the high-quality violins at reasonable prices because the Chinese are so technologically advanced. "Scott Cao was voted to be the best imported

violin in America."

Dugan brings his violins to the IRA Civic Center once a year in the spring time when



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Dugan stocks and repairs string instruments of all sizes including the tiniest violin, or a one thirty-second.

area children are invited to browse various instrument displays and sign up for lessons. As children walk by his display, Dugan encourages them to pick up an instrument. He teaches the children and their parents simple strokes and says they're often instantly interested.

"After we ask if they'd like to play, they're pretty much sold. Those who weren't even thinking about taking up the violin, sign up for lessons right then and there," he said.

A child as young as 3-years-old can start lessons with the tiniest violin, which is one thirty-second the size of a full sized violin. According to Dugan, children who start this young and continue through second grade can go through all sizes of violins as they grow, from the one thirty-second to a one sixteenth, one-eighth, a quarter-size, a half, a three-fourths and finally a full-

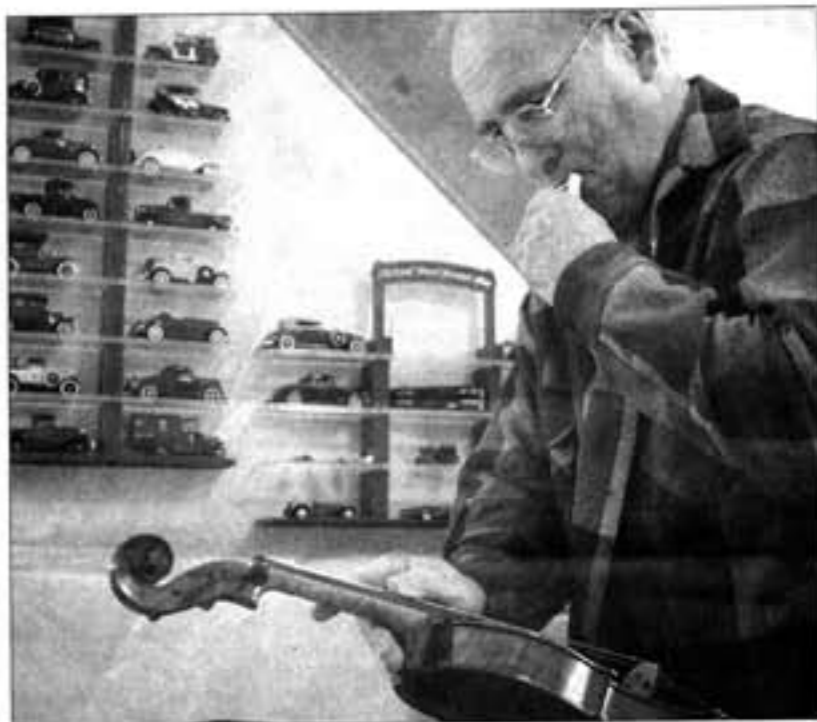


Photo by Britta Arendt

Richard Dugan says the hardest thing for violin students to learn is how to tune their instruments. He often spends hours before each orchestra performance tuning all the instruments.

size.

"It's not like buying shoes; it's hard to play without a violin that doesn't fit right," explained Dugan who said, if the children are really young, he invites parents to take a lesson, too.

"The hardest thing for students to learn is how to tune their instruments," he explained. "As a child, my lessons were 57 minutes but by the time everyone had their instruments tuned, we only

had 15 minutes left."

All the repair work Dugan does for the IOS, he does free of charge. "It's my contribution to IOS."

He also continues to play violin with the orchestra and is comfortable with his position as an average player. In fact, he chuckled as he said he has become quite accomplished in the "air-bowing technique," which is much like "air-guitar."

"I've surpassed Air-bowing 1, 2 and even Advanced Air-

bowing," joked Dugan. "I play second violin which is the lower section. And the only reason I play second is because there isn't a third."

But Dugan knows much more about the instruments than most players and even teachers. He knows the purpose of the instrument's every curve, the reason for the direction in the grain of its wood and the importance of the smallest post.