

Philadelphia Mummers String Band Association 2020 Annual Banquet & Installation of Officers

Good evening, everyone. It is my pleasure to welcome you to the 2020 Philadelphia Mummers String Band Association Banquet and Installation of Officers. I want to thank John Pignotti for inviting me to emcee tonight's event. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Jim Donio...and I am a Mummer! When I joined the Hegeman String Band at 15, I had no idea how my life would be changed forever because of this amazing hobby that has meant the world to me.

I am so incredibly proud of this tradition that we all share. Mummers work hard, they entertain and bring joy, and yes, they compete. But, it's so much more than that. We build community and form relationships that, if we are lucky, will last a lifetime. I know mine have. It's about family, friendships and fun. And as for me, those lasting relationships are helping me fulfill a goal that I had of emceeing this event that I first attended as a teenager. And it's the first of a new decade.

I have not had a traditional mummings career. In fact, my education, my professional life and this unique hobby unexpectedly intersected. And I'm getting the chance to share with you tonight that a lot of what I have achieved, I owe to my involvement with the Mummings. At age 19, while in college studying for my degree in communications at Temple University, I was one of the first employees of the Mummings Museum as the editor of its newsletter.

In the coming years, I would also represent the Museum as a traveling speaker, sharing the history and spectacle of our cherished parade with visitors to Philadelphia from all over the world. I have always believed, and continue to strongly believe, in the potential for our Parade to have the wider exposure, greater appreciation and worldwide recognition it truly deserves. Simply put, there is nothing quite like it anywhere.

With that in mind, I could never have expected that on January 1, 1985, I would be given the opportunity to express my perspectives when I took a seat next to legendary Philadelphia broadcaster Larry Kane in the TV booth for the String Band Division. I had the good fortune to be a part of the broadcast team for several years, along with participating in preview and post-Parade programming.

One of those programs -- Mummer Mania -- on which I joined former Philadelphia TV personalities Ray Murray and Nancy Glass -- actually won a local Emmy Award for Outstanding Cultural Programming. That Emmy certificate has occupied a special place on the wall in every home I've ever lived in.

In the next few years, my life took an unexpected turn when I accepted a position in the music business.

When we start a job, no one ever expects to be there for more than 30 years...literally half of their life. But that's what happened to me. I started work at an organization that promotes the music industry, and I played a part in providing a platform for a number of artists to begin their careers such as Mariah Carey, N' Sync, Josh Groban, and Taylor Swift, among others. I served as President for 16 years, until this past September, when I left to devote more time to my writing and teaching.

About seven years ago, I became a professor of music business, and I have classes at Temple and Monmouth Universities. I get to help prepare the coming generation of music creators and executives. And when I think back, my appreciation for playing music all began when I walked up the steep staircase of the narrow clubhouse on South Bancroft Street in South Philadelphia to audition as the bell player in Hegeman String Band.

I couldn't then...and frankly never
learned...to read music. You see, I just
needed to hear a song once or twice and
then I could somehow play it note for note.
Don't ask me how...I could never explain it.

Music Director Herman Seflin was
justifiably skeptical of my abilities.

And after all, I was succeeding a pretty
estimable bell player named Bill Speziale.

But Captain Al Fink had taken a liking to me. Now, in the interest of full disclosure, my uncle was the club's landlord. I'm not sure whether Al wondered whether they'd be evicted if they didn't take me. But in any case, let's just say he pushed for me with Herman and I passed my music test with flying colors.

I was also a budding designer and Al encouraged me to come up with themes and costumes. So I did.

Some of my favorites included "Philadelphia Sports Parade," "Girls of the World," and "Showtime at the Copacabana."

I collaborated on developing those themes and learned so much from creative Mummers legends like Butch Robison and costumers Carl and Mary Braun. I know Butch is so proud of each and every one of his children and grandchildren who are carrying on the tradition, especially Sean Graser who obviously got his grandfather's creative gene, and Thomas "Shaggy" Robison, who we'll be honoring later tonight.

After eight years with Hegeman, I left and joined Greater Overbrook for one year...long story you'll hear more about later tonight...and then returned to Hegeman where I stayed until I got my TV break.

And, honestly, I continue to be floored when I am approached by young string band members, who were not even born when I was in the booth, as they proceed to quote some of my on-air observations and quips word for word. I realize that's the magic of the internet and YouTube.

Those moments are captured forever.

And I'll confess, there are some late
nights, when I pick up my voice remote,
and I ask to see one of those parades, and
I sit there in the dark watching and
listening. Honestly, after all these years,
I still cannot believe I was so fortunate.
I will always be grateful to this
Association and those who supported me to
have had that unforgettable experience.

After my time on TV, I came back to Hegeman for a few more years before storing my glockenspiel in the attic. Then I had a brief but eventful stint in the Golden Crown Fancy Brigade, working closely with my friends Bill Burke and Mike Rayer.

After that, just when I thought my New Year's Days on Broad Street were behind me, John Pignotti pressed me into service as an official and I've enjoyed that for the past 15 years.

Last year, I was asked by one of my dear friends Angelo Lutz, who'll we'll be celebrating with two other very special Mummers later this evening, to serve on the Board of the Palandro-Ferry Memorial Foundation. It is my honor to be involved with such a meaningful and worthwhile organization.

Well, again, I just want to say thanks so much for having me and I look forward to a great evening of congratulations, commemorations and comradery.