

FRIENDS REMEMBER WENDY WILLIAMSON AS ADORED TEACHER

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The best always came last in Wendy Williamson's piano classes. That's when one of his students would invariably ask, "Wendy, can you play some martini music?"

Martini music was what the students called the jazz standards that Williamson loved: songs like "Satin Doll," "Autumn Leaves" and "The Lady is a Tramp." These were some of his favorites, the kind of songs he used to play 40 years ago in Anchorage night spots with such names as The Last Chance, The Green Lantern or The Silver Slipper.

Then, as in his classroom, Williamson's body would gently sway as his fingers roamed the keyboard, instilling new life in the oftplayed melodies, recalling an era when jazz was king.

Moments such as this were recalled earlier this week when dozens of Williamson's friends gathered in a local home to remember him. On June 25, John Wendell "Wendy" Williamson, one of Anchorage's finest jazz pianists and bestloved music teachers, died of cancer at the age of 65.

When people aren't talking about Williamson's freeandeasy style of piano playing, his perfect pitch, or the way he could make any song swing, they talk about how this musician's musician was one of the most adored people in Anchorage.

"He was the kindest man," says Mickey Belden, an adjunct faculty member of the University of Alaska Anchorage music department.

"I never ever did hear him say a mean word just never did," says Elvera Voth, a longtime member of Anchorage's classical music scene who gave Williamson his job at the college.

"(He was) the kind of guy you'd like to have for a friend, a buddy, and he was extremely talented, on the verge of being a genius," says Jack O'Toole, a local drummer who used to gig with Williamson.

For 17 years, Williamson's large, rounded silhouette was a common sight at the music department at Anchorage Community College where he taught music theory, private piano lessons and piano for classes.

Most people remember his eyes eyes that appeared, as one former student put it, as if they were "full of the dickens." His broad cheeks made him look like an unshaven Santa Claus.

Unlike most of his casual colleagues at the college, Williamson always arrived at work in a suit something almost unheard of in the lowkey community college setting. But after all, Williamson was a jazz man, and jazz players almost always wear suits.

"You have to dress for (teaching)," he would tell his wife, Marjorie Williamson. "You have to look like something."

Despite his quiet, unassuming nature, Williamson had a keen sense of humor. Many still recall the daily piano wars Williamson used to wage with former University of Alaska Anchorage piano professor Jean Claude Billaud. The two had adjoining studios. Whenever Williamson would hear Billaud coming down the hall, he'd run to his piano and begin playing a piece of classical or jazz music. Within seconds, Billaud would finish the music from his own studio.

Elvera Voth says Williamson was also always full of oneliners. Once, she asked him if he sang. His joking reply: "Only at the police station, lady, and then I 'll sing plenty."

Even near the end of his lengthy illness, he kept his sense of humor. While he was hospitalized, a nurse came in to ask for the umpteenth time what allergies he had. Williamson responded, "Penicillin and rock and roll."

Born in Chehalis, Wash., Williamson received his earliest musical inspiration from his father, a trombone player. Marjorie Williamson says the father got Williamson and his two brothers, Vernell ("Tex") and Euell, interested in music by offering them the choice of "either hoeing the garden or practicing." They chose the latter.

After earning his Bachelor of Music degree from Washington State College, where he also played trombone, Williamson received a master's degree in music from the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. While he was schooled in both classical and jazz, his heart belonged to jazz.

Williamson first visited Anchorage in 1947 after being discharged from the army. But prior to settling in Alaska, he played with some of the big band era's greatest musicians, including touring with famed band leader and trombone player, Jack Teagarden.

"When I first met him (Williamson) I thought he was rich because he had 51 white shirts," says Marjorie, adding that the shirts were for the 51 weeks Williamson once spent on the road with Teagarden. He hated to do laundry.

Marjorie was working as a stewardess for United Airlines and living in Seattle when they met. The couple married in 1956 and moved to Anchorage. They had three

boys; Jim is now 31, John, 28, and Scott, 30. All three play instruments: Jim the trombone, Scott the drums and John, bass guitar, piano and French horn.

Like his father before him, Williamson encouraged his sons to learn the basics of music theory.

"One thing dad pounded into us was we had to know how to read (music)," says Scott. "(He'd say) 'There'll always be a lot of good players, but the people who know how to read are the ones who'll get the jobs.'"

It worked for Williamson, who for years found steady work in Anchorage playing gigs in bands such as the Rhythm Kings, Wendy's Wiggers, the Wendy Williamson Trio and the Auke Bay Conservatory of Dixieland Jazz. But Williamson's bestloved and steadiest gig was his teaching job at the Community College.

He was one of the first people Voth hired when she was assembling the music program there in the early 1960s. She says no one was more amazed to be on a college faculty than Williamson. "He couldn't believe it," she says. "He used to say things like, 'Call me professor.'"

Voth, who left the college in the mid-1970s, says Williamson's jazz courses were some of the school's most popular classes. Part of their popularity was due to his teaching style. He avoided any situation that would make his students nervous and keep them from playing their best. He abhorred recitals. In his piano lab classes, where students played electric pianos while wearing earphones, Williamson never told the musicians what day he was grading them. That way, they always felt at ease.

"(He) was very affable, very easygoing and very helpful," says former student Karen Strid. "He would never put anyone down in a class and he'd always show you a bunch of (music) examples. He'd always play for you quite a lot.

"He not only just talked music, he could also do it very well. He was marvelous. I think he must have known 2,000 tunes."

Williamson's illness finally forced him to retire from the college in December. Before his death, he saw to it that Strid, who studied under him for 18 years, was appointed to fill his position.

"He hung on just long enough to hear she got the job," says Kay McInnes, secretary to the music and dance department.

In Williamson's honor, the department and his family have set up a memorial scholarship in his name. Additionally, a program of Dixieland jazz to be performed July 22 at the International Inn will be dedicated to Williamson.

"I really owe Wendy a great deal," says Strid, who in taking over Williamson's post was also bequeathed his voluminous music teaching notes and materials. "You talk to anyone who knew Wendy and they loved him.

"He's going to be missed."