

## Chatham UU Music Director Is A True Music Man

by Elizabeth Van Wye

If you travel to Orleans on Route 28 along Pleasant Bay, you might be happily surprised to hear organ music coming through the trees. Frank Toppa, the music director at the Chatham Unitarian Universalist Meeting House, can often be heard making beautiful music in his backyard barn.

But the backyard is just a start when it comes to Toppa's musical instrument collection. Step inside the delightful cottage Toppa shares with his wife Barbara and son Isaac and suddenly his passion becomes clear. Nestled together neatly and displayed with care individually across the knotty pine walls are dozens of instruments including a tuba, a French horn, the chimes from the old Hyannis Federated Church organ, a cello, a bass, a piano, several ukuleles, three harps, a banjo and an African talking drum he salvaged from the Orleans transfer station gift shop, to name just a few. Each musical instrument has a story, and as Toppa starts to tell one, his eyes light up. It is clear that the canvas bag on the floor embroidered with the words "Music Man" was meant for him.

His role as a church music director has three main tasks, according to Toppa. There generally needs to be music for the service, music for the choir and music for the season or the topic at hand. Although his first love is the organ, members of the UUMH congregation can never be sure which instrument, or instruments, Toppa will be playing and that is part of what makes the job interesting to him.

"There are the basic fundamentals and

then an infinite number of ways of approaching them," he says.

Toppa's role at UUMH is just one of the musical hats he wears. For more than 30 years he has taught music at public and private schools in Massachusetts. Since 1999 he has worked at the Belmont Day School where he teaches general music, choral, theater, guitar and instrumental music.

Any experience or encounter can result in a teachable music moment for Toppa. "I make few distinctions between my outside and my music life," Toppa says. "If I am playing in an orchestra, that might become a theme for my class."

His unique approach to teaching includes designing a different musical theme unit for each month of the school year, teaching age-appropriate skills from grade one to grade eight. No two years are ever the same and he figures he has designed more than 300 different musical theme units during his time at Belmont. "I like tying together themes and tangential activities," he says. "It captivates the imagination when the kids least expect it."

For example, last September he taught a unit called "Tick Tock Toons, the Metronome and the Beat," which explored musical beats using a variety of metro-

nomes. By January and February his students were learning first about music keyboards and then how to make music from cups and spoons, which helped them understand rhythmic patterns. At the end of the year they were immersed in singing

and awareness of music in musicals, from "Peter Pan" and "The Wizard of Oz" to "Wicked" and "Oklahoma."

He recently saw the movie "The Great Gatsby" and was soon musing about the way that a music unit could be put together around the music of jazz, the Gershwins and that era. "I have faith that the real world

might be meaningful and relevant to the subject," he says. He has been known to make a musical unit relating the motion of a sewing machine bobbin and the fifth note of the musical scale, named appropriately for this sewing related unit, "so."

"I like to satisfy my musical curiosity and I think 'at least one person in the class will enjoy this unit!'" he says with a laugh.

Toppa is a native of Newport, R.I. and started voice lessons in first grade. He calls the music scene in Newport "inspirational" and he grew up exploring the many sounds of the town, including those coming from

Newport's jazz and folk festivals. When he was a senior in high school he competed for and won the Dionne Warwick Voice Scholarship given by Hartt College, which the singer had funded at the school in Hartford, Conn. He earned a bachelor's degree in music education in choral performance in 1975.

Toppa began his career teaching high school chorus in the Nauset Regional School System and started the string program there. Over the next three decades he would teach, served as music and choir director at churches on and off Cape, produce musical theater ranging from "West Side Story" to "The Wizard of Oz," play string bass in numerous instrumental groups including with Cape Cod Symphony, and continue to learn. Toppa earned a masters degree in organ performance from UMass Amherst in 1991 and another masters in musicology from Boston University in 2003.

He commutes a little over two hours to Belmont, where he lives during the week. His days are full of music at school and when school is over he teaches music to private students every afternoon from 3:30 until 7:30 p.m. or when "the janitor kicks me out!" This year he taught voice, piano, ukulele, string bass, trumpet and cello. He is especially partial to voice, he says, believing that the voice is the soul of a musician.

"I am a frustrated singer," he says with a smile, "that's why I took up so many different instruments!"



Music is in everything, says Frank Toppa, the music director at the Chatham Unitarian Universalist Meeting House. ELIZABETH VAN WYE PHOTO