

Marching to the beat of his own drum

John Owens took a unique path to job at Lake Michigan College



Kate Genellie / HP correspondent

John Owens, director of Lake Michigan College's music program, became interested in teaching while tutoring students in Germany. He began teaching at LMC in 2014 and is finishing up his doctorate.

By **KATE GENELLIE**
HP Correspondent

ST. JOSEPH — When John Owens was in high school, he bought his first set of drums, intending to start a death metal band with his friends, but he set it up backwards. It may have looked like an inauspicious start, but for Owens, now Lake Michigan College's music program director, it was the beginning of a varied and far-ranging career.

After Owens graduated from high school, he began attending community college and working in a furniture store, but he soon realized that working in retail just wasn't for him.

Instead, he auditioned for the United States Army Band. He was 19, a few years and much playing experience past his first backwards drum kit, and he got the job. First, he went to the U.S. Army School of Music, then he was stationed in Germany.

"Our job was to be ambassadors for the United States," Owens said.

Owens' band played beer festivals and at parties and events held for visiting politicians and diplomats. Owens and his bandmates met and talked with German locals, who had some very specific stereotypes about Americans.

"Germany thinks of American music as jazz and country. And they think we use the 'f' word a lot," Owens said.

As part of the U.S. Army, Owens played in nine countries, and visited 25 on his own time. He also began tutoring high-schoolers in German-American schools.

"It was just so exciting watching the students grow. That's what ignited my love of teaching," Owens said.

Most of Owens' fellow bandmates had earned a degree by the time they started with the U.S. Army, but because Owens had started so young, when he left the Army he felt somewhat un-

moored.

"I had very little life experience," Owens said. "I got a job at a sporting goods store, which lasted a whole four days."

But Owens knew he wanted to keep teaching. So, with a musician's flair for finding the next odd job, he began teaching drumlines, while also playing in a punk band, teaching drum corps, and doing a stint drumming for Knott's Berry Farm.

Owens also landed a job at the Disneyland Resort in California as a drum-playing toy soldier.

"Everybody was just really good," Owens said. "You had to be able to dance and play your instrument as well."

The best part was seeing the children react as the band marched by, Owens said.

"They were just so excited. They were pointing at you and at your hands and the drumming you're doing."

At Disneyland, the band practiced before each parade and after the park closed at midnight.

"Everything is down to a T. Everything's very precise. It's very Disney," Owens said. Being in the park at night also afforded a different view of the popular park. Trees became doors as cleaning crews filtered out of the park's hidden pathways. "Disney looks just as cool at night as in the daytime. It changes your perception of it."

As he worked these jobs, Owens was also getting his bachelor's degree in music education. Later, he got his master's degree while also teaching high school band, and he's currently finishing up his Ph.D.

Owens began teaching at LMC in 2014. He said he has tried to bring his own background as a self-taught, self-guided musician into the classroom.

"I try to adapt that to my students," Owens said. He tries to find out what interests them personally and encourages them to explore that in their assignments.

For example, a student inter-

HIGHLIGHTS

Name: John Owens
Job: Music program director at Lake Michigan College
Town: St. Joseph
Fun fact: Owens worked as a toy soldier at Disneyland.

ested in the band Queen might write a paper about how "Bohemian Rhapsody" was recorded, Owens explained. "They're still learning the basics, but it's more self-directed."

Owens' teaching philosophy stems from the educational philosopher John Dewey, who said that what was important in art wasn't just the finished product, but the experience of creating it. When children play, they're completely immersed in what they're doing, and Owens wants art to be like that for his students, he said.

At LMC, Owens teaches jazz band, rock ensemble, and lecture classes, including History of Rock Music.

"That class is just so much fun," Owens said. "I try to make sure that even students who aren't music majors make music during that class."

Because making music isn't just for music majors, Owens said. Owens looks at music as a part of his students' life and general education, at music's connection to mathematics, philosophy and sociology.

"Music is a holistic construct. Everything is interrelated," Owens said. Rock music, for example, has always dealt with themes such as race and injustice. "Political matters have created our music. Musicians are most known for challenging the status quo."

Owens wants to introduce his students — both in his ensemble classes and lectures — to new concepts in music.

"They have the ability to leave with this new idea that will perpetuate their interest in music," Owens said.