

# Former RHS band director dies

By **MILLICENT MARTIN**

STAFF WRITER

For more than three decades, Stephen C. Varnell pushed hundreds of local music students to play their best and respect authority.

Some alumni are recalling those

lessons from their retired teacher, who guided Richmond High School's band as it appeared in the Macy's Day Parade, Pasadena Rose Parade, Indianapolis 500 Parade and won the Indiana State Fair band contest. He died Thursday at age 62.

Bill Gibson, a senior when the band won its 1988 state fair title, recalled Varnell's inspiration. Varnell knew the students had a good pro-

gram while they were at band camp, but when they returned to Richmond, they lost their focus before the competition.

"When he got very quiet and didn't say much, that's when we knew he was angry," Gibson said. "We were all scared out of our minds. ... He played a very good mental game to get us to work."

Varnell also inspired his students to learn challenging music for concert band competitions. Later Gibson would play some of that same music while studying music education at Ball State. He credits Varnell for his choice of music as a profession. He's now operations manager of U.S. distribution for an instrument manufacturer in Elkhart, Ind.

Gibson kept in touch with Varnell through the years and about 10 years ago, Varnell told him he could call

him "Steve."

"I don't think I can do that," Gibson told him, so accustomed to calling his mentor "Sir" as he had been taught.

Gibson's sister, 1996 RHS graduate Anne Kender, said she also learned responsibility from Varnell. She said she appreciated the interest he took in his students before and after they graduated.

"Everybody respected Mr. Varnell," said Kender, who lives in South Bend. "He completely earned it and commanded it. He helped shape a lot of young people... He wanted everyone to reach their full potential."

Another 1996 graduate, Matt Grafflin of Richmond, said Varnell was one of the many reasons why he became a band director after graduating college.

"He was very passionate about wind literature," Grafflin said, "... and because he

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was passionate, sometimes he was a little gruff in his instruction because he cared about the end result. He was always supportive of his students."

Grafflin was inspired by Varnell's efforts to make his program better, such as traveling to band contests to see what he could glean from other schools.

His dedication to students was especially apparent one year at band camp when Varnell became ill with appendicitis. Varnell wanted to stay to work with students, Grafflin said, but doctors told him he needed to recuperate at home.



**STEPHEN C.  
VARNELL**

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