

Touching lives in unseen ways....

There are many generous and philanthropic people who live in Grand Junction. Many of them are widely known, and many are not. Stephen Boelter is one of those individuals who touched lives in unseen ways.

Stephen and his wife Karen Combs moved to Grand Junction in 1999 after falling in love with the beautiful landscape of western Colorado. Knolls Canyon Overlook was the scenic backdrop for their marriage on a warm December day in 2000. Both Stephen and Karen's businesses are based in Madison, Wisconsin. Karen works for Epic Systems, a company that specializes in medical software. Stephen owned his own business, Boelter Design Inc., specializing in wayfinding. He consulted with architects and designers to guide people through large facilities. His firm went into buildings and found out why people got lost and what to do about it. Stephen and Karen travelled extensively, but looked forward to returning home and immersing themselves in the cultural and recreational activities that western Colorado has to offer.

Stephen quickly looked for opportunities to connect to people in the community and did so through cultural activities. He became a member of the boards for the Grand Junction Symphony and KAFM radio station. Stephen and Karen's generous patronage extended to many spheres. The Mesa State College Music Department, High Desert Light Opera, the Western Slope Chamber Music Series and the Moab Music Festival are among the local and regional organizations to receive support.

Stephen developed his passion for music when he was a youngster, starting piano at age seven, and clarinet at age 12. His mother, father and brothers are all musicians. Stephen played clarinet in high school and at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and in a community band in Milwaukee, and most recently in the Grand Junction Symphony and the Mesa State College Wind Symphony, which is where I met this wonderful man. While his degrees were in business and interior environments, his passion was music and design. He thought of architecture as frozen music, and music as architecture that moved through time.

In 2002, when asked if his business would support an event at the MSC Music Department by sponsoring a guest conductor, he enthusiastically agreed. This event was Colorado Senior Band Day and hosted 80 high school musicians. Today, this event, now called Best of the West Music Festival, brings in two guest conductors, a guest artist and a guest composer from which a new piece of band music is commissioned. Over 170 high school students participate in concerts, rehearsals, master classes and sectionals with outstanding guest artists and hear the world premiere of a new piece composed by an internationally renowned composer.

Part of what drives their thinking is a couple of basic questions. How can you affect as many lives as possible with your philanthropy? How can you affect lives in ways

you don't know? A scholarship can help one or two people, but with a program like Best of the West, over 1000 lives have been touched.

Stephen was passionate about the effect of music on people's lives. He believed that cultural activity enriches your life and creativity spurs inspiration. If all you have is music you downloaded, you have no relationship with it and no chance to learn more. You'll never know the difference. So, he helped establish a music festival that enriches life, spurs inspiration and creates relationships between students and music. Through this event, a new family was born.

In April of 2009, Stephen received a Distinguished Alumni award from his alma mater, the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. While other recipients spoke of their professional accomplishments and their families, Stephen talked about the Best of the West family and how important it was to provide a unique musical experience to students who would never have such an opportunity. He was most proud pulling together this family of students, faculty, composers, conductors and performers. Stephen died on July 10, 2009 from melanoma skin cancer.

A Memorial Service will be held on Friday, September 18, 2009 at 6:00 p.m. in the Recital Hall of the Moss Performing Arts Center on the campus of Mesa State College.

by Calvin Hofer