

Mraz, Ashworth among BHS Hall of Fame honorees

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Two of the inductees into the Burnsville High School Hall of Fame this year have something in common – a passion for what they do.

Thomas B. Mraz

Thomas B. Mraz was a member of the BHS staff for 30 years, retiring in 1991 – at which time his dedication to the school was recognized when the school's theater was named for him.

Even before the Thomas B. Mraz Center for Performing Arts carried his name, the theater epitomized Mraz. His eldest son, Mike, said that the core to his father's legacy is his passion for excellence. "The quality of his productions was superior," said Mike. During his career, he directed more than 100 plays at BHS.

Tom's wife, Ann, noted that while many teachers influence their students, "some teachers shine a little brighter, try a little harder, expect more and demand more. (Tom) was such a teacher. He not only taught theater, he was a carrier of the 'theater bug.'"

Tom's passion in his 30 years as a language arts and acting teacher was evidenced by his nomination to the Hall of Fame. Actually, it was nominations – Ann said organizers told her they received enough letters to make a book and she has heard from many other former students who have said they would have sent a letter, too. Ann also received a personal letter from Howard Hall, who was principal during the bulk of Tom's tenure. Having recently learned that Tom was chosen as an inductee, Hall wrote: "Tom earned this honor and deserves this more than anyone who taught at BHS."

Mike agreed with that assessment – "It was something he earned, but not something he expected," he said. "He was very charismatic, but he is also very humble." When the theater was named for him, Mike said, "He thought that was a nice honor, but I don't think he was waiting for it."

Tom's retirement was prompted by a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease and he also suffers from Lewy body dementia. He currently lives in Harmony, Minn., which is south of Rochester and allows for easy travel to the Mayo Clinic. Whether he is in attendance at the induction ceremony will depend on his health; both Mike and Ann said that Tom "has good days and bad days."

Mike said that his father was really interested in the students. "He was a very passionate 24/7 kind of teacher," he said. Although Tom allowed some leeway, Mike said, Tom has a firm hand. "Everyone knew where the lines were," said Mike who, along with his two younger brothers, Monty and Tom, all took part in theater at BHS. "Everyone was glad to have a leader ... he lit that fire in all of us."

"His heart was certainly in the arts," Mike continued. Of the hundreds of people who were part of the program over the years, he said, many of them told him, "The one thing that stuck out for me was working with your dad."

In addition to his dedication to his students, Tom was widely known for his touring theater program, "Showtime," which started in 1963 where high school students performed at state and federal prisons. It was the only program ever sanctioned by the Federal Bureau of Prisons to go inside prison walls. Not only did Showtime bring the arts to those incarcerated, but it also gave the high school students an opportunity to serve and to see the ramifications of choices and what it feels like to be locked in a prison, Mike said.

Tony Ashworth

While the 1988 BHS graduate jokes that he'll never have a wing of the high school named after him because "they'll probably check my grades," Tony Ashworth of Prior Lake is honored to be named to the BHS Hall of Fame and to share that honor with the likes of Tom Mraz.

"They must not have had enough applicants," Tony quips of his own nomination. He is humbled by the honor, as well. "I have not told anybody, with the exception of family, about this," he said. "If I

go to bed at the end of the day and can say, 'I'm proud of what I did today,' that's good enough for me."

Tony once aspired to be a youth minister and, although college was not for him, he has found a way to give back by ministering to the community through such programs as People Serving People, Toys for Tots and Big Brothers Big Sisters. He has also organized food shelf drives, adopted families at Christmas and encouraged his employees to volunteer in their communities.

Following in his father's career footsteps, Tony has worked in real estate since 1997 and has been president of RHS Realty since 2000. Since then, the company has grown from one branch and 10 agents to five branches and 300 agents. He is also director of the Twin Cities Association of Realtors.

When his father died, Tony said, he opened the Yellow Pages in search of a place to volunteer.

"I just wanted to get involved," he said, noting that he placed several calls to various agencies and vowed to serve whichever one called back first.

People Serving People was the call he took and he was named their Volunteer of the Year in 2000.

Tony said that he's touched by the people he encounters in his volunteer work and he most enjoys the one-on-one work he's able to do – like tutoring a woman at a shelter who couldn't even spell her own name.

"Sometimes, just knowing people care is enough," he said of those he has helped. "I always wanted to make an impact on somebody," whether it was people he met in the community or at school.

Life, he said, is what you make of it. "There are choices you make," he said. "I'm either going to get through it or I'm not. 'Not' is not a choice."

He said that it's his post-high school activities that have earned him this recognition since he doesn't feel that he made his mark during school.

He does, however, credit his football coaches (he played three years for BHS) and former hockey coach Tom Osiecki for making the biggest impacts on him then. "They were great role models at a time when I needed to see men as role models," he said.

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