

THIS WEEK IN THE FLATHEAD

A look at the week ahead in movies, music, art and entertainment

40 YEARS

Flathead Valley Community Band hits milestone

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By KRISTI ALBERTSON/This Week in the Flathead |



1. Irv Milheim plays the tuba during Flathead Valley Community Band's March 27 practice at Kalispell Middle School. The band, which features musicians from age 15 to age 90, celebrates its 40th anniversary this year.

For the last 40 years, musicians of all ages and abilities have found a home with Flathead Valley Community Band.

They meet nearly every week, a group ranging in age from 15 to 90, and in experience from high school band to years of playing professionally. The one thing that binds them all together is their love of making music — and their

enjoyment of one another.

“The camaraderie is great,” said Deanne Lehner, a clarinet player and the nonprofit band’s secretary. “They’re extended family for us any more; I’ve known some of these people so many years.”

Roberta Struck, one of the band’s original members and a clarinetist, agreed.

“Aside from the enjoyment of making music, it’s a great group of people there,” she said of why she has played with the band for 40 years. “I would miss them if I left.”

Flathead Valley Community Band was formed in January 1973, when longtime band [teacher](#) and musician Don Lawrence agreed to teach a one-credit band class for Flathead Valley Community College, Doug Hetrick said.

Catch Flathead Valley Community Band in action

There are several opportunities to listen to the band in the coming months:

- May 8, 7 p.m. — Spring concert, Flathead High School auditorium
- June 22, 10 a.m. — Glacier Park Lodge’s 100th anniversary celebration, East Glacier
- July 4 — Fourth of July Parade, Bigfork
- July 25, 6 p.m. — Flathead Valley Community Band’s 40th anniversary concert, Marantette Park, Columbia Falls. The band will perform its original concert set from March 17, 1973.
- Aug. 16, 8:30 a.m. — Northwest Montana Fair Parade, Kalispell

For more information about any concerts or about the band, visit www.fvcband.org.

A band of sorts had existed before that, a pickup group that would play at the fair and for community events, said Hetrick, a baritone horn player and another of the group's original members. But the formal band emerged with Lawrence's [class](#), which had about 25 people in it.

Hetrick joined when he saw the course advertised in the newspaper. "I had just gotten out of the military and hadn't played in a while," he said. "It was 35 bucks or something, so I said, 'I'm going to [sign up](#) for that.'"



2. Roberta Struck is one of the band's two original members. The group was formed in January 1973 as a one-credit class at Flathead Valley Community College taught by Don Lawrence.

The community band rehearsed at Columbia Falls High School, where Lawrence taught. The group's first concert was March 17, 1973.

It attracted people like Struck, who wasn't too long out of high school. It also attracted a handful of married couples — and people who would later wed.

"I met my wife in band, the cutest little French horn player in the world," Hetrick said.

That family-friendly aspect has been one of the band's defining characteristics over its four decades, he said. In addition to husbands and wives who [play](#) together — including Lehner and her husband, Jim, who first joined the band in 1976 — parents and children have been bandmates.

Hetrick's and Struck's children played with the group, as did Lawrence's children and niece and nephew. Alex Sheppard, currently the band's youngest member at 15, plays along with his father, Dale.

The group loves to encourage young people to join,

Hetrick said.

"What we like to do is encourage students who are graduating from high school and not necessarily going off to college or are going to FVCC — if they want to

keep playing, we're the perfect spot for that," he said.

"Some of them struggle with being around adults, but we try to encourage young people to stay involved," he added. "We don't want them to throw away all the talent and skill they've acquired."



4. Fifteen-year-old Alex Sheppard, center, is Flathead Valley Community Band's youngest member. His father, Dale, also plays in the band.



3. John Hamel, shown here bass clarinet, is the band's oldest member at 90. He is also one of the group's most experienced musicians: He has played with the Detroit Concert Band and Benny Goodman.

Having such a wide age range makes the band better, Struck said.

"I think that makes it fun, to have the young ones and the old ones — which I'm quickly becoming," she said with a laugh.

"It's a good mix."

Despite its delight in new, young musicians, the group is also known for its longtime, dedicated members. In its 40-year

history, Flathead Valley Community Band has had just four directors: Lawrence, who led the group for about 25 years; John Laing, then the band director at Linderman School; Hank Handford, the Kalispell Middle School band director; and Matt King, band director at Stillwater Christian School.

King took over as community band director in January 2011, after playing tuba in the group for a few years.

“This group is a lot of fun,” he said. “We work hard on our music. ... We love it; that’s what brings us all together.”

The band is also bound by a desire to give back to the community, Hetrick said. Flathead Valley Community Band became a 501(c)3 nonprofit in about 1985, when the group decided to do more than merely make music.

“That’s why we play the summer months in all the local communities,” he said, adding that the band plays at parades, fairs, assisted living facilities, the Montana Veterans Home and anywhere else their music might be appreciated.



5. Doyle Wells plays the cymbal Flathead Valley Community Band's practice at Kalispell Middle School Wednesday, March 27.

“We don’t charge anything for anything we do,” Hetrick said. “We rely on goodwill donations and support from our community and businesses.”

The community is always supportive, band members said, whether through donations or providing rehearsal and performance space. Local school districts, particularly Columbia Falls and Kalispell, have been generous with supplying the band’s weekly rehearsal space, Hetrick

said.

Even with its commitment to giving back, the band’s biggest appeal seems to be the chance to make music with like-minded people. That’s

what has kept Lehner involved for so many years.

“No matter what kind of a week you’ve been having, you go to rehearsal Wednesday night and it’s fun,” she said. “For an hour and a half, you forget about anything you’d been worrying about. It’s a release for all your problems, if you have any.”