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**Profile: New MSA Director Dr. Ella Steinberg**

**By Shannon Miller**

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Her high school music students cried, and her colleagues lamented the loss of a talented music educator. But the decision to leave San Diego to become the Director of Marin School of the Arts and Assistant Principal at Novato High School was an opportunity Dr. Ella Steinberg couldn't pass up. "We always wanted to move back to Northern California. My father always said, 'When are you going to move back?'" recalled Dr. Steinberg, who grew up in Sonoma. "I was very fortunate to have a great conversation with Mark, he is very proud of MSA and he sold the school very well," Dr. Steinberg said. Then, when Dr. Steinberg accepted the position, everything fell into place; her husband, also a music instructor, was offered a position as Music Director for the Dixie School District.

Dr. Steinberg is looking forward to leading MSA into its' second decade, and her professional experience is a perfect match for the job. She first spent 15 years as a band teacher at the elementary, middle and high school levels. She then spent five years as an administrator, becoming Director of Visual and Performing Arts for San Diego Unified School District. She returned to teaching eight years ago; working as a middle school band director, as well as the Jazz Director at the University of San Diego and Winds Conductor for the San Diego Youth Symphony and The New Youth Orchestra.

"The timing was right for me to return to administration. The reason I left administration then was to have more hours for my children and teaching provided that. And I always think that administrators should go back in the classroom to stay connected with students," Dr. Steinberg shared. She believes that the diversity of her background makes her an effective leader who understands the needs of students and teachers. "It gives me a different perspective as a teacher, and now as an administrator. It reminds me what it was like to be in the classroom. I never call it the trenches because the classroom is the best place to be in the world," she adds. Still, no longer working directly with students is an adjustment for Dr. Steinberg "I don't want to be seen as a paper pusher," she said, noting that she's started playing with a local band and is looking forward to performing at an upcoming MSA Soiree.

And Dr. Steinberg is determined to make MSA a leader in arts education.

"My priorities are to uphold artistic excellence. How we get at that is to make sure our teaching is rigorous enough to uphold a competitive stance in the arts," she said. "Commitment follows competence; when someone drops out of studying dance (for example), they usually drop because they haven't reached a level of competence. We train students so they are competent and have certain skill sets that promote excellence. The

practice it takes to get to next level—that’s what it means when we talk about the rigor,” she adds, noting that a students’ passion for the arts also grows with their level of competence.

“I want people to have passion for anything they put their minds to. My son has passion for chemistry. It’s something that should follow our natural interest. I’ve also seen a lot of people who only concentrate on the passion, but don’t focus on developing the level of excellence to maintain a life in (their passion). I can’t imagine teaching the arts without passion, but when you are talking about being an artist it goes beyond passion,” Dr. Steinberg said.

Dr. Steinberg does not believe that MSA’s function is to only produce professional artists. “Students can choose to do whatever they want with their training. It’s going to transfer to any other field—the rigor and training are what we are instilling in our students.”

She notes that teachers must also have a necessary skill set to be effective. “I’ve seen a lot of people go into teaching, like musicians, who have a lot of passion, but they don’t have (the teaching) skills. What happens is that they turn students off.”

So far Dr. Steinberg is impressed with what she sees at MSA. “It’s so much better actually seeing the students here (after summer break). Watching how much respect students have for each other and how much they care about each other. It’s exciting. There’s a general good feeling on this campus that is really nice,” Dr. Steinberg said.

“I’m looking forward to seeing students settling into that depth of instruction and seeing the productions and the first soiree. There’s so much. What I really like is how much I’m included in all of NHS; I enjoyed going to the football open house too,” she said.

Dr. Steinberg appreciates the value in keeping her position strictly administrative; unlike her predecessor, she will not be teaching any band classes.

“Now that I’m here I understand the wisdom (of only being an administrator). It has allowed me to work closely with other administrators, and given me time to look at curriculum and how to make improvements on campus. I think there are going to be some really good conversations that will strengthen the bonds (between MSA and NHS),” she said.

Novato High School Principal Rey Mayoral agrees. As part of the committee tasked with finding a new MSA Director, Mr. Mayoral notes that it took two rounds of interviews to find a candidate of Dr. Steinberg’s caliber. “Once we met Ella Steinberg, we knew she was the one for this position. She fits into NUSD, NHS and MSA as smoothly as a hand fits into a glove. It’s like she’s been here forever,” he says, adding, “I feel really comfortable as a principal having her make decisions.”

As MSA enters its’ second decade, Mr. Mayoral agrees that Dr. Steinberg is taking the helm of a far-reaching program. “MSA is important to our district. What the program offers to all

kids, to my mind, enriches the district academically and in the performing arts to a level we've never seen before in our district. To have kids come here from all over the county is remarkable," he says.

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