

THE SILENT FLUTE

By

Felix Mayerhofer

One of the things I enjoyed as a school band director was recruiting new members. When I entered fifth and sixth grade classes at the beginning of a school year, I'd ask, "Who wants to join band?" Every hand would shoot up! Each student had an idea what they wanted to play: some the trombone or clarinet, others, the flute, drums, or trumpet.

It took about two weeks for the children and their parents to make up their minds what instruments they wanted to buy or rent. When the day of their first lesson arrived, I could hear the commotion as the flute students scurried toward the bandroom. When I opened the door, they whizzed by, found a seat, and anxiously waited with great expectation for me to make them instant players.

I showed them how to blow into the hole of the top section of the flute. Going down the line, each student made a sound for me, until I came to a pretty but fragile girl. Her name was Jennifer. Even though she tried with the biggest breath she could muster, nothing came out.

"Don't worry," I assured her, "you'll be able to play soon." I had the students put the three parts of the flute together, then taught them

how and where to place their fingers. At the end of the rehearsal, the kids left the band room as excitedly as they had entered, with the trumpets scrambling in next.

Besides their individual group instructions, the entire band got together once a week. As the beginning band improved, Jennifer was always there, but looking frailer as the weeks passed. She still couldn't get a sound, but her friends continued to encourage her. Jennifer knew the fingerings and did everything correctly, so I knew she'd been practicing. She was a sweet and patient girl. Since she'd made the effort to learn, I didn't pressure her.

After a rehearsal, I asked Jennifer to stay. "Jennifer," I said, "You don't seem to have enough energy to play the flute. Is anything wrong?"

With maturity beyond her years, she looked up at me with her big blue eyes and said, "I have cystic fibrosis and I'm going to die."

A sadness came over me. With tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat, I asked, "What is cystic fibrosis?"

"It's an inherited disease," she explained, "with a thick sticky mucus that clogs my lungs and airways, making it hard for me to breath. My older brother died two years ago of the same disease, but luckily, my younger sister doesn't have it."

"Why did you take up the flute since you have trouble breathing?" I asked.

In a small but determined voice, she responded, "I've always wanted to play the flute and love it, even though I can't make a sound."

I wanted to hug her as if she were my own child, and when she left, I sat down heavy-hearted having trouble holding back tears.

As the weeks past, Jennifer coughed and choked more, and during one of our rehearsals her seat was vacant. I was told she had had a serious breathing attack and would be out for a few days.

When she returned to band, Jennifer tried playing her flute like she had never been ill. I began teaching the flute players three new notes. Each student played them for me to make sure they knew the fingerings. When I came to Jennifer, I decided to jump to the next player because the notes were higher and more difficult.

“I want to try it, too,” Jennifer said softly. Lifting the flute with her delicate hands, she put the instrument to her lips, and out came three beautiful notes. I never saw a broader smile on a child’s face, like she’d been touched by an angel. There was stunned silence, then the band broke out in cheers, loud applause, and yelled, “All right, Jennifer!” It was a moment to be remembered.

We never heard her play again. The principal came into the bandroom the following rehearsal and informed us that Jennifer had died quietly in her sleep. There wasn’t a dry eye in the band.

She left all of us with wonderful memories of her courage and what it was to never give up... Jennifer’s silent flute will be forever missed.