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When you think of an institution in a community, you usually picture a business or a public building. An institution can also be a person who has been involved and contributed to that community for a long time.

That's Dr. C, otherwise known as Dr. J. Gordon Christensen. Who doesn't know the impeccably suited man with the precise speech, the Corvette and the drive to initiate and teach a love of music to everyone?

Dr. C has announced his retirement from Chase County Schools after 40 years as a kindergarten through sixth grade vocal music teacher.

As of June 1, he will become the Director of Music, organist and resident director of St. Paul's Music Academy in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

The Dannebrog, Neb. native actually began his professional music career in his junior year of high school, when he played the piano for his first wedding job. He has since played for 403 more weddings, and averages 10 weddings per year.

"There's a sheer joy that one has from being really close to the 'nerve center' of a wedding. You see the face of the bride or groom, or sometimes both, as they take their vows," he commented.

"It's a great, great joy."

Dr. C obtained his Bachelor of Music degree from Hastings College in 1965. He then received a Master's of Music in 1971 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, followed in 2004 with a PhD, also from UN-L.

He began his teaching career in Palisade, spending 1966-68 teaching vocal music to grades K-12, plus directing the junior and senior class plays, and teaching English and speech.

He moved to Imperial in 1968, heading up the newly-established elementary vocal music program. It was a year of school consolidations, busing of students between the various school buildings and the introduction of K-6 physical education, as well.

Dr. C also accompanies the high school fall musical and directs the sixth grade operettas.

His impact on the community has been great. He was the founder of the Chase County Area Arts Council. He has directed and accompanied the Imperial Community Players' summer musicals.

In the 70s, he was involved in the Wauneta Crystal Theater Company variety shows.

His highest visibility, though, has been at Zion Lutheran Church, where he is Director of Music and head organist. The 66-year old directs three choirs, teaches midweek and Sunday School music classes, and was instrumental in founding the Abendmusik series. That program features organ recitals and choir concerts of both local and national talent.

High points in Dr. C's life in Imperial include four special ones.

The first was writing, directing and producing a pageant of the old Broadway school building

in 1991.

The second was writing and directing his students in introducing the Centennial fair song in 1985.

The third was the city's acquisition of the Steinway and Sons grand piano, housed under the Imperial Theatre stage.

The fourth was the expansion of Zion Lutheran Church's pipe organ and the development of its music department.

When teaching vocal music at CCS, Dr. C has employed two methods. His arrival at CCS coincided with a "significant change in philosophy of elementary music education."

He began teaching the Carl Orff system, which is learning through creativity. In this the activity, such as hitting a note on a xylophone, leads to an image (the note), which leads to a symbol, or printed note.

That was the opposite of traditional learning, Dr. C said. He also taught the Kodaly system, which dealt with ear training.

One of the big changes since he began teaching has been the introduction of technology in teaching.

"When I started, 'computer' was a spelling word." Dr. C likes the computer's record-keeping capabilities. "I think it's a major step ahead," he said.

What has he enjoyed most about teaching? "Seeing the knowledge come to light in little people's lives." Teaching a love of music is high on the list, too.

There hasn't been anything Dr. C has disliked about teaching, except that at the end of every school year he still hasn't accomplished everything he wanted to.

"There are so many outstanding memories. One thing has been continuous. That is how the students are always willing to sing their hearts out for me."

Dr. C will still have students, or "scholars," as he calls them. In his new position he will teach piano, organ and instrumental music students at the Academy. He will also serve as a consultant to the church for the development of its pipe organ program.

"The congregation wants to turn it (the church) into a magnet of Lutheran liturgical practice, as well as a center for a concert series," he stated.

Dr. C has long been interested in, and practicing, liturgical music in relationship with the Lutheran liturgical worship.

The teacher plans to "become highly visible in Omaha and Council Bluffs."

He will continue to wear his signature bow ties, and drive his Corvette, "not for my own benefit but for the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord."

Dr. C will soon begin packing up his collection of coffee mugs, most of them given to him by former students. All 302 of them are in his room at school, some from as far away as England and Iraq.

"I've had first and second graders ask where is the mug my mom or my dad gave" to me, he laughed. In one instance, it was a grandparent's gift.

A lot of scholars have sung for Dr. C over those 40 years.