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'Never give up': Stites retiring from OPS after 14 years as fine arts coordinator

By Karah Wilson Messenger-Inquirer
May 24, 2023



Tom Stites, fine arts coordinator for Owensboro Public Schools, will retire after 14 years in the position at the end of this academic year.

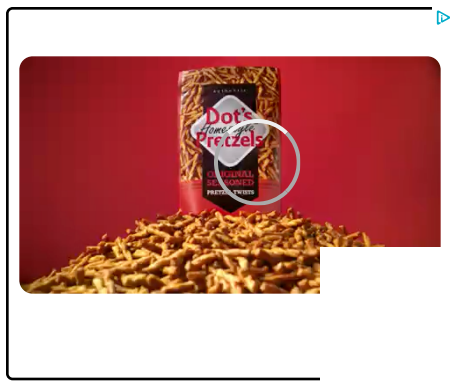
Photo by Greg Eans, Messenger-Inquirer | geans@messenger-inquirer.com

Tom Stites, fine arts coordinator for Owensboro Public Schools, will retire from his position after 14 years at the end of this academic year.

Stites grew up in Hopkinsville, which is where his appreciation and love for teaching and music came alive.

"I'm kind of unusual as an arts person because I never signed up for it," he said. "They came and got me out of study hall and asked me how tall my dad was and wanted to know how good my grades were and handed me a tuba. I never even wanted to play tuba."

He began playing music after that experience in the eighth grade, and his passion for teaching followed shortly after.



“When I was a sophomore in high school, there was senior trumpet player that sat 13th chair out of 13 for his entire career,” he said. “He lived in our neighborhood, and he came by after school one day and asked me to help him.”

Stites helped his bandmate two nights a week and realized the problem was that his friend couldn't read music.

“I taught him to read music and took him through the whole process,” he said. “After the audition, he moved up to fourth chair. The director stood him up and made him a hero in front of the band. I was in the back thinking that felt good. That was the day I decided to be a teacher.”

Stites attended Western Kentucky University, where he majored in music.

“I started my career teaching in the mountains of North Carolina as an assistant director for one year,” he said. “We won the Marching Bands of America championship, which was quite a nice high point.”

Following the win, the lead director of that band retired, and Stites stepped in to take over the position at the age of 21.

“After a year, I'd had enough of that, and my next job was in Atlanta at Marist School,” he said. “I was there seven years and built the program there from 16 to 100 students and created a fine arts program with seven teachers.”

Stites realized his career goals were not going to be able to flourish in his position at Marist School so he began working at Science Hill High School in Johnson City.

“I started with 60 kids in the program there and stayed there for a little over 22 years,” he said. “We built the program up to 300 students total, and I was able to have a lot of success with marching competitions, four concert bands and did all of the big parades, like Macy's.”

For the last 14 years, Stites has remained at OPS. He was initially attracted to Owensboro because of the district's support of the arts.

"That's what brought me here, and I've enjoyed it very much," he said. "One of the highlights here has been 'the sampler,' which has made it so that all students have the opportunity, no matter where they're coming from, to try whatever they want and do as many arts as they wish."

Stites' reason for retirement now is so he is able to spend more time with his family. His daughter lives in California, and his son lives in Lexington.

"This job requires about 100 nights a year of attending performances on top of the regular daytime job, which means there's not a lot of time to travel and spend time with my kids," he said. "There's only so many days we all have on this Earth, so I want to take time to do that and travel with my wife."

As the end of his time at OPS approaches, Stites still has hopes for the district and its students after he retires.

"One of the things we pushed on a few years ago was every art for every child in every school," he said. "We're very close to that being complete. We've had such great growth with our elementary visual art program, and we already have great musicians teaching at every level. I hope that journey continues."

Stites said one wish he has for the district after he leaves is for it to continue building individual support for students.

"For a large percentage of our population, they don't have the means to get their child private lessons and advantages that can open up doors for them," he said. "Music education has always been a pathway for people that have the drive, and the excellence becomes something that's part of them. I don't see it as preparing people to be professional musicians but to become better people."

For students who are considering becoming involved in arts or are already involved, Stites has one piece of advice — never give up.

“People that take up something in interest, like music, it’s a big part of their middle and high school career, and then they continue that in college,” he said. “If they go into other careers, they continue being a musician for the rest of their life, playing in church, community groups, symphony. There’s always a way to contribute.”

Kara Smith will begin as fine arts coordinator on July 1, replacing Stites.

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