

# FrontPorch

## Together Again

*Saline's high school fiddle ensembles merge.*

The breakup was tumultuous, but the reunion has been sweet. Ten years after the Saline Fiddlers Philharmonic split in two, the high school ensembles will reassemble as a single private nonprofit August 1. Soon-to-be co-directors Brad Phillips and Jimmy Whitman hope to heal what they call a "cultural divide" between the Saline Fiddlers and the Fiddlers ReStrung on a summer camping trip to the Irish Hills. There, thirty-four young musicians will bond and prepare for the new group's first gig at the Saline Summerfest on August 9 (see Events).

Current Saline High School students are too young to remember the split, which grew out of disagreements over organizational structure and creative direction.

The Saline Fiddlers Philharmonic was founded in 1994 by then orchestra teacher Bob Phillips (no relation to Brad). The idea, Bob Phillips recalls, was to offer "an extracurricular to expand [students'] world beyond the classical music we were learning in orchestra class."

The group split in 2003, in part because school administrators requested that Ben Culver resign as director. The Saline Fiddlers became an independent nonprofit led by Culver, while Fiddlers ReStrung re-formed as a school-affiliated nonprofit, currently overseen by the district's Community Education unit and a parent advisory board.

Brad Phillips, who was a senior in 2003, remembers the split as "a stressful thing for students to see happen." Step-dancing choreographer Sheila Graziano recalls being caught in the middle of an

"emotional" division; she ended up instructing both groups.

"Everybody had valid points," Graziano says. "The group that became a private nonprofit wanted to travel more and farther, but that was too strenuous on other families. Some liked operating under guidelines that the school provided.

"Initially, I liked that oversight because it provided security and structure, but my opinion didn't prove right all the time," Graziano adds.

"Things pulled off in the private setting were so cool," like last summer's tour of Great Britain. She says the merger "will bring a nice balance back."

Both groups have fewer students this year than in the past. A large number of musicians graduated last year, bringing the independent Saline Fiddlers down from thirty-five students to seventeen. Fiddlers ReStrung experienced a similar decline, and also has seventeen members.

Saline High's switch to trimesters "makes it harder to choose music as an elective," Brad Phillips explains. This impacts both groups, because enrollment in music classes is required to participate.

Community Education has been "supportive" of the decision to merge, according to Whitman, who directs the school-based group. "I wasn't involved in any way in the split, so I felt like it was my responsibility to mend some old wounds. My first move was to get on a good rapport with Ben Culver and Brad Phillips, who was assistant director at the time, and we

decided to do a joint performance for the first time" in March. This led to discussions about merging.

"We know there has always been some confusion in the public's eye about, 'Well, which group is which?'" says Saline Fiddlers booking manager Mark Visovatti. "People call to book the other group, and sometimes they just give up because it's too confusing."

As the two boards hashed out pros and cons of merging, some parents still had apprehensions. Fiddlers ReStrung parents had "understandable concerns" about being absorbed by the Saline Fiddlers, Whitman says. "Not having oversight and protection from the schools, holding on to the culture and changing the name" were initial fears that lessened over time, he says. "I

think everyone realized that we are similar, and this just means more resources, opportunities for gigs, less confusion, more equipment, and a show of unity."

The group will once again be billed under its original name, the Saline Fiddlers Philharmonic. "This is a merger of equals," Brad Phillips says. "We are already stronger, and we're not even together yet. We are back to the experience that I had when the group was with founder Bob Phillips and his wife Pam."

"It makes us happy to see them all working together again," Bob Phillips says.

—Jennifer Eberbach

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