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[Previous Page](#) [Contact Us](#)

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News

[Schools](#)

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Search Archives:

Go

- Home
- Front Page
- Community
- Health & Wellness
- Business
- Schools
- Sports
- Police
- Faith
- Family
- On The Town
- Letters
- Editorials
- Vacation
- Photos
- Neighbors
- Datebook
- Archive
- Special Section
- Archive
- Advertising
- Private Party
- Classifieds
- Private Party
- Order
- Rentals Order
- Rentals
- Real Estate
- E-mail Us

Meet Valley View's Mr. Music

Music director is one of seven 2009 Lew Roth Award recipients

By Eliav Appelbaum eliav@theacorn.com



ELIAV APPELBAUM/Acorn Newspapers LEADING THE BAND—Mitch Schuster, longtime music director at Valley View Middle School, has received a Lew Roth Award from the Simi Valley Education Foundation. The award recognizes people who give extraordinary service to students in the Simi Valley Unified School District. Schuster and the other award recipients will be honored at a ceremony next month.

Mitch Schuster is a popular model of consistency.

He's been music director at Valley View Middle School for 23 years—longer as director at the same school than anyone in the history of Simi Valley Unified School District.

And Schuster has no plans to leave, saying he still finds great satisfaction in teaching students the joy of music.

"I like the subject, and I enjoy young people and getting to know them," the 51-year-old said. "I enjoy leading them to performances."

Schuster is one of seven Lew Roth Award winners who will be honored by Simi Valley Education Foundation on Feb. 6 at the Grand Vista Hotel in Simi Valley.

Roth was a school board trustee for 23 years who founded the education foundation in 1989.

The other Lew Roth winners are Sharon Dawson Hardy, a counselor at Royal High School; Vicki Garrison, special education teacher at Simi Elementary School; Jorge and Cecilia Curiel, custodian and campus supervisor, respectively, at Justin Elementary; volunteer Debbie Goodnough at Wood Ranch Elementary; and Joy Barkyoumb, a literacy coach at Park View Center Elementary who is being honored with a lifetime achievement award.

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"Each and every one of them are great recipients," said Cindy Jacoby, executive director of the education foundation.

Valley View Principal Terry Webb said Schuster is well-deserving of the Lew Roth honor, noting his uncanny ability to help first-time musicians quickly gain control over their instruments.

"He miraculously transforms beginning students into polished students within a semester," Webb said. "He's done a phenomenal job."

After completing his studies at Cal State Northridge, Schuster was named music director at Valley View in November 1984 on a recommendation from CSUN supervisor Robert Dewarte.

Schuster was still completing his student teaching requirements at Thomas Star King Middle School in Los Angeles but was hired with an emergency credential, and he's remained at Valley View ever since.

He admits it was a rough beginning. A newcomer, he replaced Larry Elginer, a popular and respected director who transferred to Simi Valley High.

"It was a tough first year," Schuster said. "They were all his students and they loved him, rightfully so."

Today, Schuster's classes are among the most popular at the school: His students number 230, while another 50 are on a waiting list. He calls the music room his "laboratory," and he's at ease discussing everything from U.S. history to college football. Unless he has a meeting, he spends an hour after school helping students.

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A trumpet player who tutors at his home when he has time, Schuster spent 10 years in charge of the choir program. His band program includes the only middle school strings section in the district.

Schuster lives in Simi Valley with his wife of 22 years, Vicki, and their four children, David, 20, Amy, 18, Anna, 17, and Joshua, 14.

Schuster said he can be demanding at times, but that's only because he wants to see all his students succeed.

"The vast majority of my students come to me with no experience," he said. "I want my students to be bright and have a good attitude and be willing to put the effort in. . . . I like to contrast it with a sports analogy: No one sits on the bench in band or orchestra. Everyone has an important role to play."

The Lew Roth Award winner said he has no intention of slowing down or moving elsewhere, which is music to the ears of his students, their parents and his colleagues.

"I have no plans of retiring soon," said Schuster, who has been asked many times by the local high schools to move up. "I can see myself doing this for another 15 years."

