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Andrew De Young

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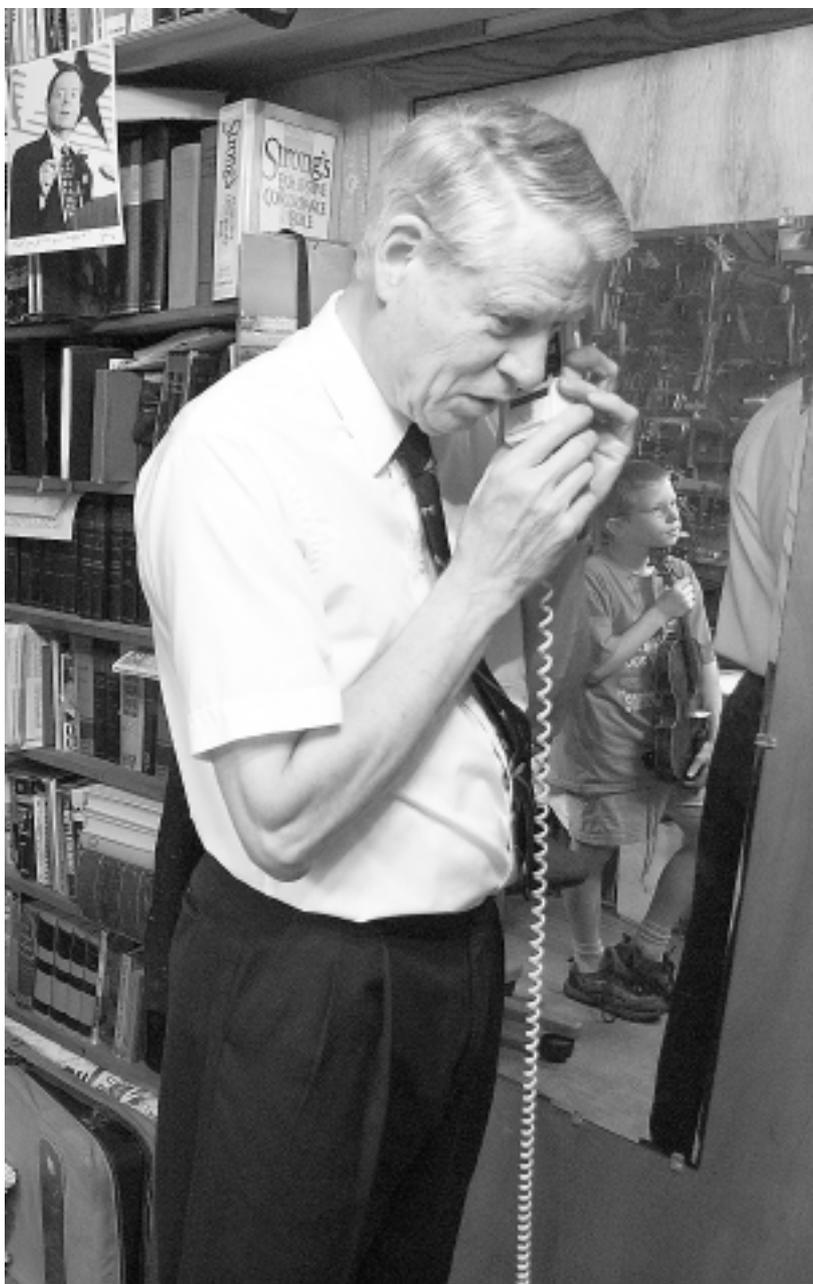
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**Gary Vander Hart**

*Photo by Doug Burg*

*\*Sioux County Folks* is a collaborative writing project undertaken by Dr. James Schaap and several of his advanced writing students, as well as Orange City photographer Doug Burg. The collection is a scrapbook of more than 50 feature stories and portrait photographs of residents of the county surrounding Dordt College.

## *Sioux County Folks*

### **Gary Vander Hart: Luthier**

*Andrew De Young*

This story could have been told differently. It could have been the story of a young man whose parents' piety loomed menacingly over his entire life. It could have been a rags-to-riches story, the tale of a violin prodigy and his many mentors, his journey from obscurity to fame. It could have been a folk-legend, a humble maker of stringed instruments locked away in his workshop like Geppetto, laboring on his beautiful creations long into the night.

The life of Gary Vander Hart is the stuff Hawthorne's tales are made of—strong faith and ripping guilt, the preaching of the Word, and a search for redemption. Think Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*. Or, if you'd rather, think of Jonah, the biblical prophet who came face to face with the inescapable reality of God's call in the belly of a big fish. In a sense they're related to the story of Gary Vander Hart.

"When I was young, I always wondered what I should be when I grew up," he says. "Should I go into music, or should I be a pastor, or should I be a missionary?" He's not all that far from retirement right now, and it's clear that that very question has haunted his psyche ever since, never totally answered.

Born in Pella, Iowa, but raised in Denver, Colorado, Vander Hart was the son of a man who was himself dedicated to Christian ministry but plagued by a "thorn in the flesh." Rev. Cornelius Vander Hart suffered from a physical condition that caused his head to shake involuntarily, a condition that hindered his preaching ability and forced him to abandon an early job as a missionary to New Mexico's Navajos.

Rev. Vander Hart's condition didn't stop him from making sure that his children grew up to love the Lord, however. He and his wife devised a Bible-reading program for family devotions, and during the course of Vander Hart's childhood they went through every book of the Bible several times. In addition, the children attended Vacation Bible School and catechism classes without fail, plus Youth For Christ rallies or the occasional Billy Graham crusade.

During Sunday dinner, Gary says, Father Cornelius would require his boys to give him the main ideas of the morning's sermon, along with an outline and a list of the illustrations the pastor had used.

Taskmaster? Zealot? Not to Gary. "I really treasure that discipline," he says. "I don't remember being angry about it at all—because it was done in love." When he says it, his face carries an incredible iron-willed smile. "That was my parents' chief goal—to teach me to love the Lord and understand the Bible."

Soon, Vander Hart was reading the Bible three times a day and outlining the sermon every Sunday, not because he had to but because he wanted to. But even as his faith and his desire to spread the gospel grew, there was another passion that was developing within him: a passion for music.

Six years old and back from school on a lunch break, Vander Hart answered a knock at the front door and discovered two men, representatives of a local music school. "They asked me if I wanted to learn how to play an instrument," he says. "I told them that I wanted to learn how to play trumpet, but my father already had a violin. So I started playing violin instead, and I stayed with it."

That's something of an understatement. In his life-long study of the violin, Vander Hart found a new set of men to admire, composers, performers, and teachers whose influence over him would match that of his father. One such man was David Eisenberg, the finest and most expensive violin teacher in Denver, under whom Vander Hart studied during his high school years. In fact, he was so inspired by Eisenberg's playing that he began practicing two hours a day, going to concerts, and begging his teacher to let him play the pieces that he heard his favorite violinists play.

"I would sometimes practice on the front porch of my house and imagine that I was in front of an audience at a big concert hall," he says. "I wanted to be a concert violinist. When I went to college, I became a music major."

In the music program at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Vander Hart thrived. But even though his appreciation and love of music was deepening every day, the call to preach the gospel kept echoing through his soul.

One summer, when he worked at a lumberyard in Denver, his fellow workers, not believers, mocked his enthusiastic piety. “I started thinking that if there’s one thing the world needs more than music,” he decided right then, “it’s God.” In his third year of college, he switched to a pre-seminary track.

But when he graduated from the seminary, he felt drawn back into music, starting string programs at Christian day schools in Pennsylvania first, and later in South Dakota. His plans were firm: teach during the school year and train to work with Wycliffe Bible Translators during the summer. Teach and play and spread the Word.

Circumstances worked against those thoughtfully and prayerfully designed plans. That very year the South Dakota Department of Education ruled that all teachers had to have practice teaching and education classes. “I didn’t have them,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. “So, instead of training at Wycliffe, I went to Dordt College to take education courses and do my student teaching.”

While at Sioux Center, Gary Vander Hart, teacher/theologian/musician—or is it musician/theologian/teacher?—began yet another string program. When it thrived, Sioux Center Christian School Principal A.J. Boersma offered him a half-time job leading the school’s music program. Vander Hart accepted, and found a similar half-time job at Rock Valley.

Wycliffe—for better or for worse—was out of the question. Seemingly, his future was sealed. He’d teach and play and, well, one can always find a place to preach.

Sioux County has been reaping the musical benefits ever since. Sioux Center Christian School’s music program is still thriving, years after Vander Hart’s departure. Somewhere between soccer practice and youth group, generations of Sioux County kids shoehorn violin or guitar lessons into their already busy schedules.

That’s not all. This musician/theologian/school-teacher quadruples as a master craftsman who’s created and maintained hundreds of the very instruments still strummed, plucked, or played throughout the region. For decades, whenever kids break a string or need a bow re-haired, they will drop it off at the Sioux County String Center, a tiny room adjacent to Vander Hart’s garage. Technically, he’s called a “luthier,” someone who makes and fixes stringed instruments. Instruments he’s made, by hand, are everywhere around the house. A harpsichord almost fills the front room; classical guitars, violins, and dulcimers sit proudly in the living room. He learned every calculating step in the craft himself. He must be the only self-taught Sioux County luthier.

But despite his undeniable legacy in Sioux County, despite the love of good music Sioux Countyans have, and despite their gratitude for his talents and services, for Gary Vander Hart, the call to preach the Word of God too never left his mind and soul. He still carries the zeal he’s always had.

He’ll readily tell you that he’s not disappointed with the place where God has brought him. Sometimes, however, he does wonder about “what ifs.” “I felt guilty, though. I felt like I stayed here because it was easier, because I didn’t have to leave my family and be a missionary somewhere in the jungles of Africa. I felt like Jonah, running away from God’s calling.”

Some might call him confused, some misdirected, some even tormented. Call it what you will, the story doesn’t end in the shop off the garage.

In 1992, Vander Hart’s life took an unexpected turn. When his career as a teacher came to an unforeseen end, he sat in his living room reading a Christian magazine one day and saw an advertisement: twelve volunteers needed to teach in Russia.

He seized the opportunity, an answer to prayer. These days, Gary Vander Hart, spends six months of the year in Russia, teaching at a Christian day school, teaching theology at area seminaries, helping Russian school children build guitars and dulcimers and, of course, teaching them to play.

Gary Vander Hart’s story is of a man conflicted between a lifelong passion to play Mozart and a lifelong call to preach Christ. But it’s not exactly the stuff of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Somehow, some way—perhaps by grace alone—this very unique protagonist and often tortured protagonist gets what seems, at least from the outside, the very best of both his lifelong loves, somewhere far away, where the world needs the gospel he so much loves.