Michael J. Mungo Distinguished Professor of the Year

Bob Jesselson gives Elizabeth Riley one-on-one instruction at the School of Music building beside the Koger Center.

Longtime cello professor receives Carolina’s highest teaching award

By Chris Horn

Some people jog or do yoga for daily routine; Bob Jesselson starts each day by playing a Bach suite on his cello.

Far from dull ritual, playing the pieces requires concentration and energy and serves as both an aerobic workout and mind-stimulating exercise for the School of Music professor. Every day, Jesselson said, he discovers some nuance or previously unseen layer of expression in a composition that invigorates his passion for music even more.

Not surprising that he has instilled similar enthusiasm in many of his cello students since joining Carolina in 1981—or that he has been named the University’s 2010 Michael J. Mungo Distinguished Professor of the Year, Carolina’s most prestigious award.

“Music instruction is a terrific way to teach and to get to know our students. It’s a one-on-one method that harkens back to an ancient way of teaching,” said Jesselson, the University’s first music professor to receive the distinguished teaching award since 1957 when it began. “It’s very effective but very time consuming.”

Time consuming, yes. Ask him to tally the hours he spends in one-on-one instruction with 20 students every week, plus rehearsal for student performances, and his own music practice, and, well, it’s understandable why Jesselson winces and says only, “My wife would love to see me cut back my work hours.”

But not his students. Some begin their tutelage with him while in middle school or high school, then sign on for several more years of Jesselson’s instruction and mentoring in the School of Music.

“Dr. Jesselson was my teacher for 15 years, and if it weren’t for him, I am sure that I wouldn’t be playing the cello now, and I definitely wouldn’t

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be teaching it to others,” said Sarah Jackson, a USC graduate who’s earning a master’s degree at Roosevelt University in Chicago in Suzuki pedagogy and performance. “He’s very much like a coach, always there before a recital for the pep talk and always the first to give the congratulatory hug when it’s over. He pushes his students to the limit of what they are capable of doing and has high expectations.”

Jesselson’s high hopes for Carolina and the Columbia music community came to fruition as the years went by. The Koger Center for the Arts was constructed, followed by the adjacent School of Music building. And the String Project, which he directed for 15 years, took root and flourished, jump starting the K–12 string presence in Columbia and attracting more and better qualified students to the School of Music.

Jesselson recalls that when he first came to USC, his only cello student at Carolina left after one semester to join the Army. Since then, the rigor and commitment level necessary to succeed has increased even more.

“I have a reputation of being strict and disciplined,” he said. “Early on, I had to set standards—the kids know that coming in, and they respond to it.”

His colleague, Christopher Berg, a professor of guitar, said Jesselson’s rigorous standards are only part of the story.

“I have served on end-of-semester juries [i.e., playing exams] with Bob every year since he came to USC and have heard hundreds of cello students throughout the years,” Berg said. “Bob is an extraordinary teacher who has been able to initiate his students into a discipline of artistic research, and he has consistently done this with good humor, creativity, insight, and high standards. I couldn’t ask for a better colleague.”

If you’re developing a mental picture of Jesselson as equal parts drill instructor, mentor, coach, and advisor, you’re on the right track. Cello instruction demands attention to technique and interpretation of the composition—but Jesselson’s instruction goes far beyond.

“A good music teacher has to be much more than just a good musician,” he said. “We teach history—what was happening in the world when a particular piece of music was written—and physiology and anatomy—how to use the body effectively and efficiently to avoid tendinitis and performance anxiety.

“We are psychologists in a sense because musicians tend to be very right brained and don’t always see the logical steps necessary to reach their goals. It’s a matter of helping them learn how to think. And we are philosophers as well.”

Elizabeth Riley, a junior performance major, said Jesselson’s approach reflects “his mission to make us well-rounded cellists as well as well-rounded people.”

A cello professor with high standards and a sense of humor? A disciplined yet broad approach to teaching and a generous commitment of time to every student? Sounds like the high notes of a long and productive career—and the stuff for which a distinguished teaching award is given.