

FROM THE TRENCHES | BY MYRNA SISLEN

# Ten Years & Counting

**O**n March 22, two members of the Washington, D.C., city council presented Middle C Music with a resolution that not only honored the store's 10th anniversary but also proclaimed the day Middle C Music Day. Mayor Vincent Gray even issued his own proclamation.

Ten years earlier, as I was leaving a kickboxing class across the street from the then-failing music store, I decided to buy Middle C, which had been losing \$5,000 a month for five years. The decade since has seen it become the only full-service music store in Washington — and one that's profitable.

## LEARNING FROM OTHERS

**H**ow have I managed to turn Middle C around? When I bought the store, I had no retail experience. I was a classical guitarist and tap dancer. As a musician, you work 24/7, and that turns out to be great preparation for running a small business. In the beginning, my greatest fear was I'd never have a day off for the rest of my life. That has turned out to be pretty much the case, but it doesn't bother me anymore. I also didn't know the rules of business, and that seems to have been a plus — at least for me.

That said, not knowing *how* to run a business can be disastrous, and I didn't know that either. I had a lot to learn, and I needed to learn it fast.

Luckily, I realized the best way to learn is from other people. My first convention was Summer NAMM 2002. I attended every session and gained a sense of what worked for others. My second show was the Retail Print Music Dealers Association (RPMDA) convention in 2003. I desperately needed to know how to research music. Everyone, and I mean everyone, at the convention told me, "If you have questions or need help, call me any time." I still get emotional thinking

about those conventions. My questions were answered, and more importantly, I gained access to resources for future questions.

I have since attended every NAMM, RPMDA and, more recently, National Association of School Music Dealers convention. Frankly, I don't know how anyone can run a successful music store and not attend the industry conferences.

## THE BIG LESSON

I'll never forget my first important lesson. There was a session at Summer NAMM where the panelists were asked, "If you could expand in any way, what would you do?" They all said the same thing: "lesson space." So when the opportunity to expand arose in 2005, I built four teaching studios. Since then, I have built four more studios and now have 400 students a week.

Early on, I decided that to survive, the store needed three income sources: retail, lessons and instrument rentals. The last piece of the puzzle was rentals. I learned the nuts and bolts of running a program from trade show sessions. As soon as I could afford it, I became a Conn-Selmer dealer, and since then, I've added Jupiter and Cannonball.

Of course, there have been bumps along the way. Hiring and keeping good employees has been a huge challenge. Holger Siems from G. Henle once told me that he had a great staff, and when they left, it took him a decade to create another great staff. That made me feel better.

We are lucky to be part of an industry that's small and supportive. I owe my success to all of my colleagues who have been there for these 10 years answering questions and giving me suggestions. **MI**

Myrna Sislen owns and operates Middle C Music in Washington, D.C.



The author (middle) with Washington, D.C., councilors Jack Evans and Mary Cheh

## Surviving and profiting during my first 10 years in business