

# Donald Ray Thoede

ATSSB Hall of Fame Inductee, 2023

Donald Ray Thoede was born in Galveston, Texas, in 1944, to Frederick and Hettie Mae “Dutch” Thoede. When Don was four, he and his family moved to Temple, Texas. Don’s father was a man who could do virtually anything including carpenter work, to electrician work, to repairing anything that needed fixing. Don said, “I never knew how my dad did all of those things since he was raised in a Catholic convent in New Orleans and received only a sixth-grade education.” His mother completed the eleventh grade in high school but was a stay-at-home mom until Don was sixteen. Don came to love music early in his life. His father loved playing the harmonica, and his mother enjoyed playing the piano that she taught herself to play.



Don started playing the clarinet in the 6th grade band in Temple under the direction of Rusty McNeil. Mr. McNeil also encouraged Don to learn to play the saxophone, and Don soon realized that many more musical opportunities would come his way because he could play both instruments. Don entered Temple High School in 1958, where Durward Howard was serving as band director and Director of Fine Arts. During Don’s first year in high school, he made “1st chair” clarinet. He remained 1st chair clarinet in the band and also played saxophone in the Highlighters, the THS stage band. He made 1st Divisions on every solo and ensemble, was a member of the Tri-City Band for three years, was selected to the All-Region Band every year, and in 1961 he was a member of the TMEA All-State Band. Don was elected band president his senior year and was named the recipient of the National Federation of Music Clubs award in 1962.

Don entered Sam Houston State University in the fall of 1962 on a scholarship, which paid everything but room, board and his books. Unfortunately, Don was financially unable to return his sophomore year. He returned to Temple and lived with his parents for the next two years, while he attended Temple Junior College and met the girl of his dreams, Joan Kaska from Abbott, Texas. They were married in June of 1965. In January 1966, because of the Vietnam War, Don enlisted in the US Army. After four months of basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, he was sent to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, where he was a member of the 5th Army Band for six months. From there he was sent to Augsburg, Germany, where he was a member of the 24th Infantry Division Band for two years. In August of 1968, Don was sent to Ft. Riley, Kansas, where he spent the remainder of his three-year obligation to Uncle Sam.

In December of 1968, he was discharged from the army and returned with his wife to Temple. Shortly after Christmas, Rusty McNeil, his middle school band director, told Don about an opening for a middle school band director in Rockdale, Texas, and that he should contact Bill Grusendorf, the only band director in Rockdale. The position paid only \$3,600 per year, but after some deliberation, Don decided to take it. There was only one problem. Don did not have a college degree! He had only three years of college. That apparently was not an issue at that time

due to the shortage of teachers, so Don started teaching on an “emergency teacher’s certificate.” For the next three years, he moved to San Marcos every summer to attend Southwest Texas State University. In 1972 Don received his Bachelor of Music Education degree. In 1975 Don earned his Master of Education degree. During the 3 ½ years that Don was the Rockdale Junior High School band director, he was mentored by Bill Grusendorf, who taught him more about how to teach music to kids than any other band director he knows.

In the summer of 1972, Don became the head band director at Rockdale High School. During the next nine years, the Class 3A Rockdale High School band earned many awards. Although the bands were making 1st Division ratings at UIL contests, the high school band received its first UIL Sweepstakes award in 1977. After that year, all of the bands were awarded UIL Sweepstakes awards every year until Don left Rockdale. Also during that time, Don started a jazz band program. Each year, almost all the students who participated in UIL Solo & Ensemble Competition would receive 1st Division ratings. Many of the students were selected to the All-Region Band, and one of his jazz ensemble members was selected to the UIL All-State Jazz Band.

In the spring of 1980, about 140 Rockdale band members and sponsors went to Mexico City. That fall the band placed 3rd in the Class 3A UIL State Marching Band Contest. The Rockdale Band received its 5th consecutive UIL Sweepstakes award in the spring of 1981. Don loved teaching in Rockdale, but when the opportunity to be a band director in a larger city came along, he took it. Teaching the next two years in Highland Park, then a 5A high school, was a tremendous learning experience for Don. Unfortunately, because of difficulties with curriculum, and with very small numbers in the elementary school, the situation was not conducive to feeding a 5A high school band. So in 1983, Don moved to Gainesville, Texas, where he was the head band director of the then 4A high school for the next four years. When a rollback election was passed in 1987, Don, and his wife, Joan, left the district and moved to Clifton.

When Don took the job in Clifton, he was aware that the Clifton band program had already experienced a relatively successful past. He also was aware that he would be the fourth band director hired in four years. The ten years Don spent in Clifton as the head band director were some of the most enjoyable and most successful of his teaching career. The students in his bands were some of the best any teacher would want to teach. Under Don’s direction, the high school band earned nine consecutive UIL Sweepstakes awards, won numerous awards at marching festivals, and placed in the state finals of the TMEA Honor Band and the ATSSB Outstanding Performance Series several times. In addition, the marching band was a top five finalist at the UIL State Marching Contest on four occasions, placing fifth, fourth, third, and second, respectively. The year the band placed second, the band missed the state championship by only one point.

A few years back, there were five band directors in Texas who were Don’s former band students. Three of them worked with the Clifton ISD band program before moving on, one is the Head Director in Fairfield ISD, and one is the Head Director in Alvarado ISD.

Don is called on to be a clinician for both marching and concert bands throughout the state, working with music programs in Classes C through 6A. Don has presented workshops on marching band and concert band for the band directors served by Region XII in Waco. He has presented similar workshops for Lampasas, Fairfield, Teague, and Mexia ISDs. Don has also presented a clinic at TMEA that was attended by over 200 band directors.

During the past twenty-five years, Don has frequently been called on to be the clinician and

conductor for both junior high and high school All-Region Bands throughout the state, and for over thirty years Don has served as an adjudicator in Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Texas for both invitational and UIL band competitions, including marching, concert, sight-reading, and solo and ensemble competitions. He has judged all classes of the UIL Area Marching Contest for twenty consecutive years.

In 1995 the City of Clifton named Don the first recipient of the “Old Mill Award”, an award that recognizes outstanding contributions to the community’s culture and positive public image. In 1996 Don received the Denius UIL Sponsor Excellence Award, an award that recognizes the top 10 UIL sponsors in the State of Texas. In 1997 Don received a Texas Senate Commendation for Excellence in his field sponsored by Waco Senator David Sibley. In 2012, Don was inducted into the Hall of Fame of Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Mu.

Don serves as a mentor to many band directors. About 20 years ago, a band director from Crawford High School came to Don’s house after UIL Marching Contest and told Don that once again he had not made a first division and was ready to quit teaching. Don offered to mentor him, and during the spring semester helped him select his music, worked with his students, and mentored and coached the director. That spring, the director’s band made a First Division in both concert and sight-reading. Don continued to work with that director for the next few years, and he won back-to-back UIL Sweepstakes awards. When that director moved to El Paso to start a new band program, Don worked as a “phone consultant”, and the director established a very fine 5A high school band. In 2010, that same director, Ron Chapman, who had moved to Aubrey the year before, had his band named the Class 2A TMEA Honor Band. Ron asked Don to conduct one of the songs at the band’s Honor Band concert at the TMEA Convention in San Antonio.

More recently, Don was asked by Valley Mills ISD to mentor a first-year band director. Don continued the mentorship for several years. During that time the Valley Mills band received many Sweepstakes Awards, won Outstanding Band in many invitational marching competitions, placed Second at the UIL State Marching Competition and placed First at that competition the next year. In 2022, Jon Schriver, that hard-working and talented first-year band director, was named Outstanding Young Bandmaster by Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Mu.

Don is a member of TMEA, ATSSB, TMAA, TBA, Phi Beta Mu, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia. Don served as the first State Chair of the ATSSB Outstanding Performance Series and was very instrumental in writing the rules and guidelines for the competition. He served in that capacity for twenty years.

Don wants everyone to know that the success he has had as a band director would not have been possible without the help, guidance, and support he has received from Joan, his wonderful wife of fifty-seven years. Don said, “She went to every football game, every marching contest, and every concert contest for 30 years. Her presence at those functions helped me more than she realizes, and I love her very much because of it.”

Don wants to thank the members of ATSSB for this wonderful and prestigious honor.