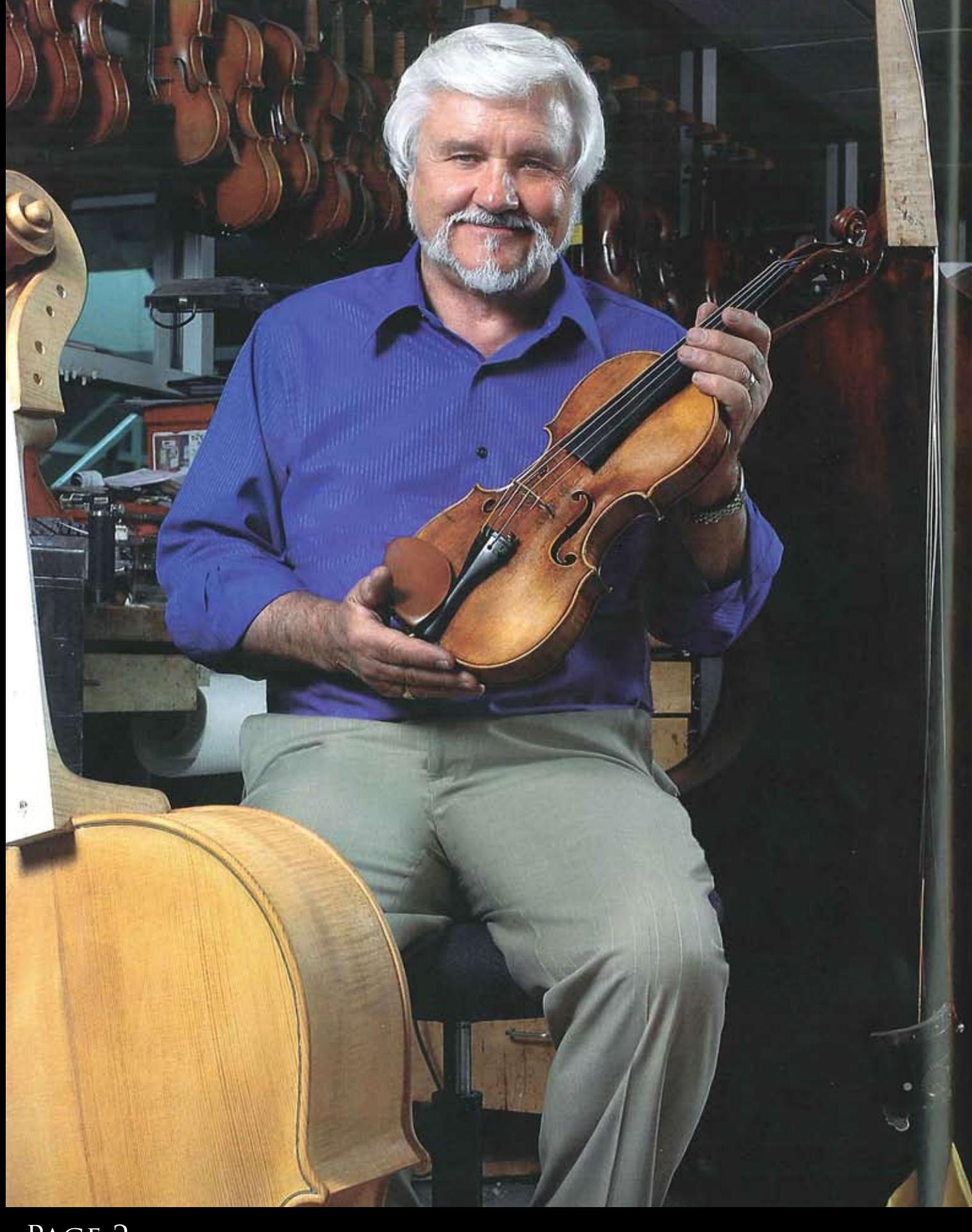


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a look at the life & work of albuquerqueans who deserve a toast.

PERSONALITY

STRING THEORY

Stradivarius, Vuillaume, Guarneri—as owner of the world renowned Robertson and Sons Violin Shop, these are just some of the famous names Don Robertson deals with daily. But what he and his family are doing for music education in New Mexico is a particularly sweet melody.

As a kid growing up in Amarillo, Don Robertson started early with model airplanes, putting pieces of balsa wood together with modeling glue. He moved on to repairing his cello, then the instruments of orchestra mates at Eastern New Mexico University. Dozens of years later, the kid with deft hands works at his Albuquerque business, Robertson and Sons Violin Shop, one of the most respected string instrument shops in the world.

The modern Robertson building on Carlisle looks more architectural gem than command central. But from there, salesmen Aaron Robertson and David Brewer match instruments to musicians.

Staffers supply more than four thousand rentals to budding students in New Mexico and beyond. Repairs in the shop transform chipped, cracked, gouged, scratched and unstrung instruments and hews into something approximating new. Master luthiers create violins, violas, cellos, and the Robertson specialty, basses. Don Robertson could step into any one of these jobs, having learned them all.

In the fourth grade, when Robertson joined the school orchestra, he chose the cello. And although his parents encouraged his love of music, he was careful not to tell them something. "I was fairly careless with my own cello, and always seemed to be breaking the neck out of it. I repaired it more than a few times," he says with a laugh.

The repairs became a training ground for hand-eye coordination. Eventually, the work led him to becoming a luthier, or violin maker. "I've made violins. I enjoy it. But the money is generated in repairs. It's more economically feasible to repair than to sell," he says.

But sell he does, traveling the world for inventory. And judging by the quality of instruments in stock, Robertson has learned a great deal. His inventory list reads like a who's who of luthiers: Guarneri, Vuillaume, Gagliano, Rogeri, Guarneri, and the Shakespeare of violinmakers, Antonio Stradivarius.

What started as a sideline in 1971 has become a thriving cottage industry.

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After earning a bachelor's degree in music education, Robertson taught in Albuquerque public schools, yet his salary couldn't support his growing family. So he walked into a local music store and started doing repairs. He did them weekends, evenings and after school. But he never gave up the cello, and even spent ten years with the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra.

His wife, Marie, who plays violin and performed with the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra, has devoted her life to music education. Like her husband, she taught music

in public schools, and is co-conductor the Albuquerque Junior Orchestra.

Marie and Don have four grown sons, and three are in the business. The eldest, Bryan, specializes in bows. He plays bass and cello. Bruce, a California businessman, plays bass. Aaron, "the people-oriented one," works in sales and is no amateur when it comes to performance: he attended the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music, and regularly plays bass with the Philadelphia Orchestra. Youngest son Justin plays viola. All four went through the Albuquerque Youth Symphony

programs, because, for the Robertsons, music education is a way of life.

The family also supports local orchestral and musical venues. Hidden in the building's back is a small, well-designed concert hall for master classes and performances. And every summer, the business packs up gear and travels to Beaver Creek, Colorado to help the young musicians who attend the Suzuki Institute. They provide donations, repairs, adjustments, and classes, often at no charge. "We're happy to do it," Robertson says.

As he introduces staff, the white-haired, white-bearded Robertson rattles off his sons' accomplishments, eager to explain how they are the stars who make things run. "It's very gratifying to have three out of four sons working here in the shop," he says.

Aaron, the only Robertson to sit regularly behind a desk, describes music as an intimate experience. Understanding it enables him to help clients. "There's a joy in matching someone to the right instrument," he says.

Bryan's clients are world renowned, such as Grammy-winning fiddler Mark O'Connor. Growing up with the business gave Bryan plenty of opportunity to do hands-on repairs. "I started re-hairing bows when I was twelve," he says, pulling a horsehair shank onto an elongated C-shaped form.

Justin's repair tools hang above his workbench on a magnetic kitchen strip: spatulas, tweezers, pliers, knives. "Dental foil," he says, as he picks up a 6" square of metal foil. "I use it a lot," he says with a laugh.

Don Robertson places a Dunkin Donuts coffee mug alongside a cello on his worktable and points to a long, deep scratch. He takes a Q-Tip dipped in colored varnish and dabs the groove. In gray polo shirt, gray slacks and black loafers, he looks more ready for the golf course than instrument repair.

Don credits four points for his success, the strings of his business instrument: Product. Price. Service. Honesty. "For a business practice, you can't miss. I could open a shoe store or sandwich shop and make them a success. Or a gas station." He pauses for effect and grins as he adds, "A string of gas stations, of course."

Dozens of years ago, the kid with deft hands took a detriment and built an asset. In an increasingly formulaic business world, Robertson and Sons Violin Shop runs counterpoint, a small enterprise whose attention to process, personalization, and relationship building stand out.

—By Aileen O'Catherine

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