

From Grandview High to ... Cirque du Soleil

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When Anthony Cooperwood graduated from college, he called his old music teacher back at Grandview High School.

“Can I make it in music?” he asked.

Or should he get a regular job, go the safe route and put his education degree to work? Teach for the next 30 years?

Bob Drummond, the music teacher, considered his former student. Smart, no doubt about it. The kid had talked his way out of a lot of trouble back in high school. Friendly, outgoing. He’d probably make a fine teacher. Students would love this guy.

But, man, Anthony can really play. Piano, bass, flute. All-state high school jazz band. Pitch-perfect harmony of practice and gift.

So Drummond reminded his former student that he wasn’t married, had no kids, the only person he had to take care of was himself.

“You want to make it in music, now is the time to find out,” Drummond told him.

Cooperwood found out. And a week ago tonight, nearly 20 years after that phone call, Drummond was at the Sprint Center — tickets provided by his former student — to see Cirque du Soleil perform Dralion, an extravaganza of circus arts, aerial and gymnastic feats, and music — with Anthony Cooperwood on keyboard and bass.

Since 2001, the Grandview alum from the class of 1989 has traveled the world with the Montreal-based circus, which each year performs before millions with its different shows.

From the Cirque website: “Fusing the 3,000-year-old tradition of Chinese acrobatic arts with the multidisciplinary approach of Cirque du Soleil, Dralion draws its inspiration from Eastern philosophy and its never-ending quest for harmony between humans and nature. The show’s name is derived from its two



emblematic creatures: the dragon, symbolizing the East, and the lion, symbolizing the West.”

The shows, which ran through Sunday, were Cooperwood’s first in Kansas City. One day last week, he returned to Grandview High and talked to students. When one asked about an “adrenalin rush” before shows, he said not really, not anymore.

“But in Kansas City, this week, probably, because this is home,” he said.

And Mr. Drummond would be in the house.

Jessie Cooperwood knew early on that her youngest child had the gift of music. He started piano at 7 and at age 10 entered a youth program at the Conservatory of Music and Dance at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

“And he was always so curious, always reading,” she said.

She tells of when he was little sending him in to take a shower. She could hear the water, but could tell it was hitting nothing but the bottom of the tub.

“He’d come out dry as a bone, with a book,” she said laughing. “He’d been sitting in there reading all that time.”

She and her husband, who still live in Grandview, have seen Anthony with Cirque du Soleil in Houston, St. Louis, Seattle and Vienna, Austria.

And she showed up at Grandview High to watch Anthony visit with students. He brought along fellow Dralion performers Marie-Eve Bisson, an aerial hoop performer from Quebec, Canada, and Marcus Perozzi, a percussionist from Perth, Australia.

Cooperwood told 250 students how he went to Truman State University on a full-ride piano scholarship. After that, he went to New York, playing gigs and giving lessons.

“I played anywhere I could to make a living,” he said.

Then one night, he saw Cirque du Soleil. Awestruck, he stayed in his seat long after everybody else left. He wanted to talk to the musicians.

“Security wouldn’t let me,” he said.

So he auditioned. And got rejected. Auditioned again and again until finally catching on 10 years ago.

He now lives in Montreal with his girlfriend and their 4-year-old son. He’s out on the road 10 weeks at a time.

When a student asked how many countries he’d traveled to, he said: “Almost all of them.”

But he wanted to inspire the students about where they might go. And what they could do.

“I see all those band trophies in the case out there,” he told them. “Lots of number ones. I was here for

some of those. Jazz band, concert band, marching band. I've done my share of 6:30 morning practices out on the football field.

"Everything I did here augmented what I would do later. Instead of getting a grade, I got paid."

He encouraged them all to work hard, keep their dreams alive and someday take their shot.

"I never thought I would run away and join the circus."