Giving new life to old instruments
Repair key to collection drive success

By KRISTEN KING
Advocate staff writer

On one table sits a clarinet with some keys missing. On another is a violin in two pieces. And hanging from a cable is a French horn so mangled that it looks like it will never play again. But it will - after Larry Dobbins gets through with it.

Dobbins is the East Baton Rouge Parish public school system's lone band instrument technician. Every day, he gets a new list of instruments that need fixing. Some just won't play. Others have been dropped or stepped on or even vandalized.

But after a few days - maybe a few weeks, given the backlog in his shop - the instruments look as good as new. They sound that way, too, Dobbins will tell you.

"I can give a year's warranty on anything I repair," Dobbins said from his shop one day last week. "I can play them all, but I don't have to any more. I've got a process from top to bottom so I never have to wonder if they're going to play."

Two rooms over, Daryl Wood stands over the "action" - or guts - of a grand piano, checking the key dips so he can return it to Glasgow Middle School as soon as it's fixed.

Wood is blind, but you wouldn't know it from his work. Since he was hired in 1975, his wife, Kathy, has driven him to work every day. She stays with him throughout the day, helps him fill out paperwork for free and, for 21 cents a mile, drives him to schools for tunings and repairs.

The repair work can entail almost anything, Wood said, considering there are more than 11,000 working parts in a piano.

"It takes a lot of expertise and concentration," Wood said. "It's not like changing tires on an automobile or pumping gas." Dobbins said it's amazing to watch how Wood "sees with his hands."

"Dobbins and Wood to help furnish needy schools"
students with band instruments and add more pianos to schools.

It's also looking to the public.

The system — with Volunteers in Public Schools, the Baton Rouge Fire Department and some local musicians — is kicking off a musical instrument collection drive this week.

Called the "Making Music, Molding Minds Musical Instrument Drive," the project's goal is to collect as many used or broken musical instruments as possible by Saturday, Oct. 31. The drive will continue after that, but the push is before Halloween.

Those interested in donating used instruments to the school system can drop them off at any Baton Rouge Fire Station location.

The system provides large instruments, but students are responsible for renting or buying smaller ones — like flutes and trumpets, said Ed Winston, director of music and fine art.

The donated instruments will be collected, repaired by Dobbins and provided to needy students who want to participate in band but can't afford the instruments.

"In my trips to schools, I can see some of the children, and if they can't afford to buy lunch, then they certainly can't afford the cost of renting or buying an instrument. So, many just go without," Winston said.

"We're trying to level the playing field," he said.

Playing an instrument "helps improve their ability to concentrate and focus ... plus it's a whole lot of fun, and it gets kids feeling like they're successful."

Pianos aren't the main focus of the drive, but Winston said, "we'll take just about anything," adding that the system would also welcome new instruments or pianos. The pianos would go to schools, rather than students, after Wood works on them.

Dobbins, who has been repairing instruments for 36 years, says he can fix just about any band instrument the schools drop off. The same goes for instruments collected during the drive, he said. But with only one technician for about 5,000 school instruments — not including pianos — when Dobbins can get to them is another story.

One day last week, there were 110 instruments in his shop waiting to be repaired.

When Dobbins started with the school system 14 years ago, he was one of three instrument technicians. Later, there were two. Now, it's just Dobbins.

Wood is also alone in his job — repairing the parish's 217 pianos, which include more than 170 studios, almost 40 grands and a handful of uprights. The job used to be manageable, he said. When he started he could visit each school several times a year to tune the pianos and keep them in shape so they didn't need massive repairs.

But since the early 1980s, vandalism has made his job more difficult, Wood said.

On any given day, the men can save the parish thousands of dollars.

Dobbins said some clarinets run $5,000. A new oboe costs between $8,000 and $10,000. A bassoon is more like $12,000. But a repair job — even with some replacement parts — is just a fraction of that cost, he said.

"I can save the School Board $1,000 in two or three hours, but I've got to have the time," he said. "We need the instruments, we really do. The parish doesn't have the funds (for new ones). But I'm just trying to keep my head above water."

Winston said he hopes the drive will generate enough instruments to also establish a new position. "We really need another full-time repairman," he said.

"Once the program gets going and is successful I hope we can justify hiring another person," he said. "Things have been cut back in maintenance for some time. It's hard to think we can do much more."

In the meantime, both Wood and Dobbins seem good-natured about the backlog.

"They said they're going to get me a computer, but a computer doesn't fix horns. I've got to have manpower," Dobbins said, with a smile. "I tell them I'm having to climb through the windows because the doors are blocked with horns."