

From weddings to the White House, North Shore orchestra is in demand

■ BY GREGG SHAPIRO

North Shore resident and musician Don Cagen and I go way back — all the way to fourth grade at Madison Elementary School in Skokie.

Since that time, Cagen has made a name for himself and his Don Cagen Orchestra, becoming one of the most in-demand wedding and special event musical acts in the region. Cagen's 25 years of professional and performance experience includes affiliations with the Evanston Symphony Orchestra, Chicago Brass Band and Fulcrum Point New Music Project, to name a few. Cagen, and his wife singer Becky, even appeared in the Dana Carvey movie "Opportunity Knocks."

One of the busier men in show business, Cagen took a few minutes recently to answer questions.

Gregg Shapiro: Don, my earliest memory of you is seeing you walking through the halls of Lincoln Junior High School in Skokie with your trumpet case. How old were you when you first started playing trumpet?

Don Cagen: I started trumpet studies in fourth grade, so about age 10. I actually chose the clarinet, but the music teacher said I would be better suited to the trumpet. Thanks, Mr. Fleming [laughs]!

GS: Did you play any other instruments as a child?

DC: We had a small electronic organ at home that I would noodle on a little.

"We have played amazing galas for Chicago's biggest institutions — The Lincoln Park Zoo, Lyric Opera, Museum of Science and Industry, Northwestern Medical, Rush Medical."

| Don Cagen

GS: Did you come from a musical family?

DC: No professional musicians, but music was certainly always in the house and encouraged. Family lore says that an early conductor of a symphony orchestra in Milwaukee was a relative on my mom's side. I would love to know more about this.

GS: When we were kids, trumpets were making a massive comeback in popularity thanks to Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. Would you say that Alpert's success as a trumpeter played a role in your interest in the instrument?

DC: Absolutely. Alpert was a huge star. But there were many other influences, including Doc Severinsen, Louis Armstrong, Harry James and classical trumpeters Maurice Andre and Adolph Herseth. Plus, of course, there were the rock bands in the 1970s that used horns, including Chicago and Blood Sweat and Tears.

GS: At what age did you think you might want to make music your professional career?

DC: In high school my playing started to

blossom. I was first chair of Illinois All-State Band, so I was lucky to have the chance to play with other motivated players and knew this is what I wanted to do with my life. I was very fortunate to have found my passion so young. I had an extraordinary high school band director, Dr. Charles Groeling, who was a mentor and brilliant musician. My teacher the last two years of high school was Philip Smith, who this year is retiring after 36 years as principal trumpet of the New York Philharmonic. Mr. Smith was very encouraging and helpful as I auditioned for music schools. Most importantly, my parents were very supportive of my choice.

GS: What can you tell me about your affiliation with the Evanston Symphony Orchestra?

DC: One of the best things about being a musician is the variety. I may play in a jazz group one night, play with my dance band at a gala or wedding the next night, and a symphony the day following. I joined the Evanston Symphony in 2000 as principal trumpet. While the orchestra is largely volunteer, there are quite a few active professional musicians, and some retired military and orchestral musicians. The group is extremely dedicated — we are all there for the joy of music making. I love it.

GS: The Don Cagen Orchestra is one of the most in-demand musical ensembles in the Chicago area. What would you cite as some of the Orchestra's most memorable performance experiences?

DC: Well, the biggest thrill of our career was being chosen to perform at first inaugural ball of President Obama in Washington. We have played concerts on Wrigley Field. We have played amazing galas for Chicago's biggest institutions - The Lincoln Park Zoo, Lyric Opera, Museum of Science and Industry, Northwestern Medical, Rush Medical. And the weddings are truly amazing. We have wonderful clients who are always allowing us to develop new concepts in music and entertainment.

GS: The Don Cagen Orchestra is also known to be popular among people seeking music for their wedding receptions. I have to ask - what band did you have perform at your wedding to Becky?

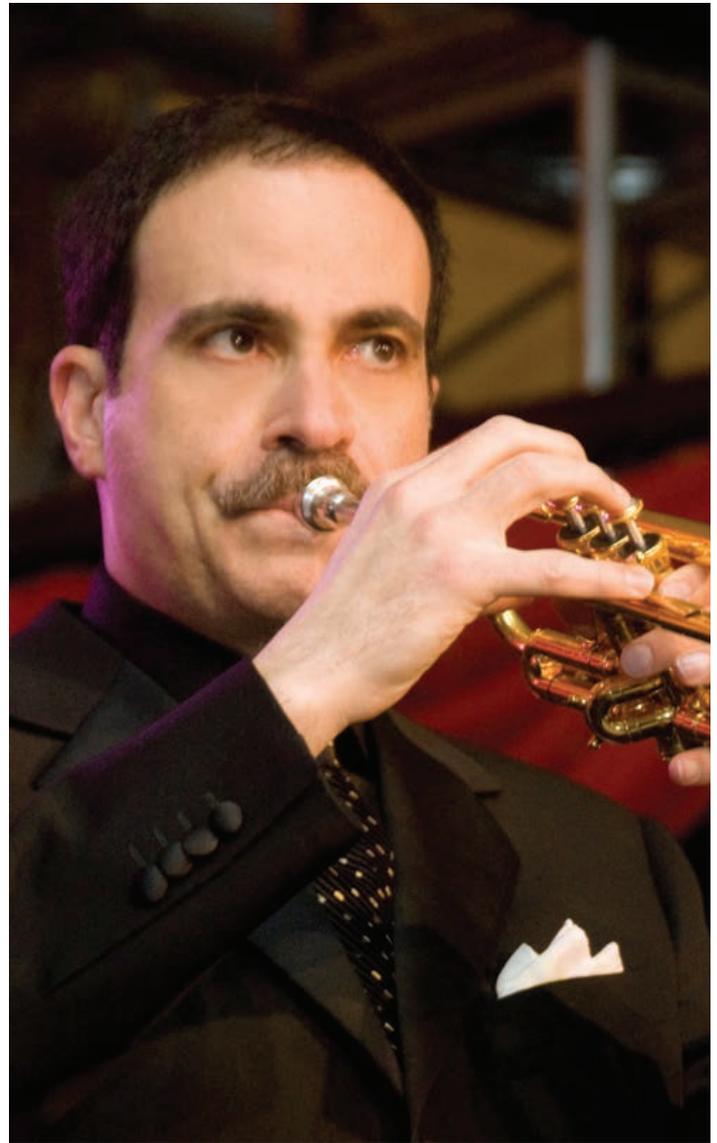
DC: [Laughs] We had awesome music at our wedding! Jazz violin star Johnny Frigo played the ceremony with pianist Allan Kaye and tenor Michael Cook from the CSO Chorus. Jack Kramer, a fine trumpeter, played our party with his band. We danced to every song the entire night. So much fun [laughs]!

GS: Earlier I mentioned Herb Alpert, who has been performing with his wife singer Lani Hall for many years. What does it mean to you to perform with your singing wife Becky?

DC: Becky is the biggest star in our family. She is a great communicator both on and off the bandstand. We are partners in life, business and music. That makes an incredible journey. How lucky can one guy be?

GS: You are also a lecturer at Columbia College. What do you like best about doing this?

DC: My teaching is in the Department of Audio Arts and Acoustics. I am passionate about teaching young sound engineers to think and listen as musical artists, not only as technology managers. This is also how I



Don Cagen

treat the engineering team in our company, Cagen Music. I love the interaction.

GS: Do you teach or have you taught music privately?

DC: I taught privately during college for a few years. I occasionally do some coaching, and I would enjoy doing more in the future.

GS: What performances do you have lined up for the summer of 2014?

DC: This summer is full of weddings, we call it our "Summer of Love!" [laughs]. Incredible locations including the Ritz Carlton, Four Seasons, Peninsula, Trump Tower, Navy Pier, Field Museum and the new Langham. We are working on a CD and concert project with four-time Tony nominee Gregg Edelman, and have a collaboration with Tony Award-winning producer Michael

Chapman.

GS: What do you like best about being a resident of the North Shore?

DC: I love the proximity to Lake Michigan, the beautiful neighborhoods and landscapes, especially the older areas. We have several 120 year-old mighty oak trees in our yard.

GS: What are some of your favorite cultural and dining spots on the North Shore?

DC: For culture there is beautiful Ravinia, of course, and there are always interesting concerts and programs on the Northwestern Campus, my alma mater. For dining, my top spots are Demetri's for Greek food in Deerfield, Hole in the Wall for Italian in Northbrook, Bob Chinn's for seafood in Wheeling, and Andy's Custard in Evanston. ■