

FALL 2025 NEWSLETTER

Grand Rapids Federation of Musicians/AFM Local 56



Our 120th Anniversary Celebration was a tremendous success!

Thank you to all who attended our historical event. We offer a hearty congratulations to all of our members who performed or received their AFM anniversary pins and certificates that day.

Be sure to check out the photo gallery of our 120th Anniversary Celebration (taken by Local 56 Photographer Daniel Terpstra/Terpstra Photography), which may be viewed soon on our website (<https://grandrapidsmusicians.org/>).

OCTOBER MEETING = PIZZA + BEER + A SPECIAL GUEST

We invite all musicians to attend our upcoming Local 56 meeting which will feature a guest presenter from the New York office. AFM Field Organizer Leni Kreienberg will address freelance musicians who play in West Michigan theaters.



Tuesday, October 14th, 5:00pm to 7:00pm
Masonic Center's West Dining Room (4th floor)
233 Fulton Street East, Grand Rapids MI 49503

Local 56 will provide pizza, beer, and soft drinks.

Free parking will be available in the Masonic Center's lot (on the corner of Fulton Street and Lafayette Avenue).

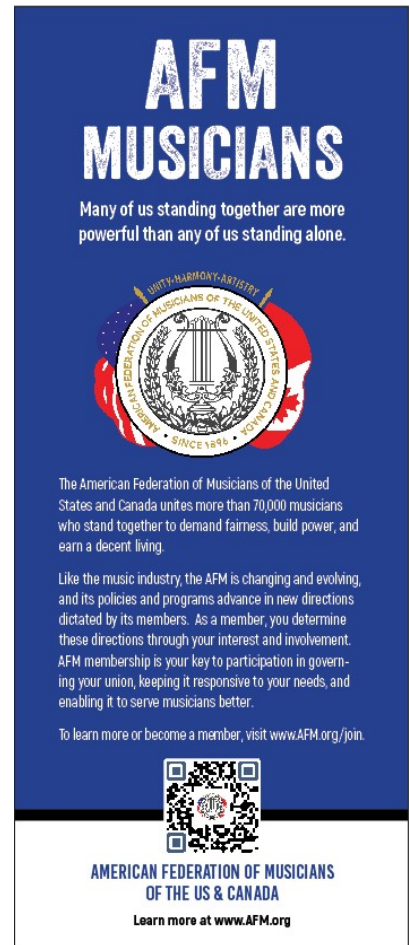
We hope that you will be able to attend (open to all, regardless of AFM membership).

[Please RSVP here](#) or by using this QR code:



MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

Local 56 is currently conducting a recruitment campaign for new and returning members. We are waiving initiation and reinstatement fees for anyone who joins by December 7th!



During this membership drive, Local 56 will waive the Federation initiation fee (\$65), the Local 56 initiation fee (\$30), and the AFM reinstatement fee (\$10).

If you know any professional musicians who would benefit from AFM membership, please encourage them to join during our drive. This link to our website gives more details: <https://grandrapidsmusicians.org/join-today/>

Questions? Contact Local 56 Secretary-Treasurer Paul Austin at (616) 451-4374 (call/text) or secretary@GrandRapidsMusicians.org (email).

LOCAL 56 ELECTION PROCEDURE

Nominations for the available positions on the Local 56 Executive Board closed on September 2, 2025. There are ten members running for office.

PRESIDENT: Bennie Keys and Eric Vander Stel.
VICE PRESIDENT: Carsten Forester and Kevin Murphy.
MEMBER-AT-LARGE: Jonathan Reed and Clara Schubilske.
ALTERNATE DELEGATE: Charles Johnson, Robert Johnson, Jack Latta, and Adam McMillan.

Here is the timeline for the AFM Local 56 election procedure.

October 2025: Candidate statements from each nominee appear in the Fall 2025 Local 56 newsletter, along with their photo.

November 18, 2025: All ten candidates have been invited to speak at the Fall Local 56 membership meeting, beginning at 4:30pm, at the Masonic Center.

November 19, 2025: A ballot will be mailed to the home address of all Local 56 active members. Note that, per our bylaws, inactive members are ineligible to vote in Local 56 elections. A return stamped envelope will be included in the mailing, in order to make the voting process easier.

IMPORTANT NOTE TO ACTIVE MEMBERS! Please be sure that the Local 56 office has your current mailing address so that you will receive your ballot.

December 8, 2025: Completed ballots must be returned via mail, or in person to the Local 56 office, on or before this date.

December 9, 2025: Ballots will be tallied by the Election Committee that afternoon at the Local 56 Executive Board meeting. The results of the election will be communicated to the Local 56 membership via email that evening, and the term of office begins January 2026.

Thank you to the ten candidates who stepped forward to run for the available positions on the AFM Local 56 Executive Board.

CANDIDATE STATEMENT/PRESIDENT

Hello there, Local 56! I am **Bennie Keys**, and I am running again for the office of President of Local 56!

I have been excited to lead the Local on several ongoing projects that are really going well! If we continue on the path, we will see the benefits of working together.

The Executive Board and I, plus various members of our Local, work hard to keep us in the forefront of the entertainment industry. With your continued support, I will make sure we accomplish all of the goals that are important to working musicians.

We are working hard to get a CBA for our pit players so that they can have better wages and working conditions. I look forward to continuing the effort for better pay and job security for all of you.



CANDIDATE STATEMENT/PRESIDENT



I am **Eric Vander Stel**, Local 56 President Emeritus, and I am running for the President's position for the upcoming term. I have held the position before and believe that I can contribute to the future success and growth of Local 56.

I have successfully negotiated CBA's, partnering with the AFM Symphonic Services and the bargaining unit committees of the GRS and LSO. I have worked with AFM International Reps, have participated on Local 56 scholarship, finance, and recruitment committees, and have chaired several other Local 56 subcommittees.

I was on the Festival of the Arts music committees from 1992 to 2024, and I was on the Labor Fest committee for the same amount of time. Both events employed Local 56 musicians through MPTF funding. Those meetings were important to provide MPTF work and Local 56 membership incentive and to also support the West Michigan Labor Council, the Downtown Development Board, and the Arts Council.

I have been a delegate to multiple AFM conventions and served on subcommittees. I have been active at AFM Mid-America conferences and served on committees there as well.

I have 50 years as an active performing musician, and I have crossed paths with many who share our profession at different levels. Those connections transfer into support and opportunities for our Local to grow

Should I be elected, I can only promise I will try my best, as I have in the past.

CANDIDATE STATEMENT/VICE PRESIDENT

My name is **Carsten Forester**, and I have been a freelance musician and teacher in the GR area since I moved here in 2018. I have always been a multi-instrumentalist and genre hopper, but currently I mostly play bluegrass mandolin and flat-pick guitar. I split my time between performing as a sideman, solo gigs, recording, and teaching lessons. I consider promoting music as a community activity to be at the core of what I do, whether that is hosting jams, playing benefit shows, or giving my students the opportunities and encouragement to play music with others in a collaborative setting. Outside of music, I spend much of my time on community organizing and activism.

As an Executive Board member for the past year, I have worked to connect Local 56 with other unions and community groups in



town. This has led to us participating in coalition events like the International Workers Day rally and the Labor Day coalition celebration. I believe that, in the current political climate, we need to build organizing experience and relationships between unions so that we have a stronger network of solidarity to rely on when the need arises. I have already built relationships with local members of IATSE, Teamsters, GREA, AFSCME, and GRPL-GREIU. One of my main goals in running for Vice President is to take this work to the next level and to do my part in making Local 56 an example for others to follow.

The other main focus I will have as Vice President is to continue the organizing drives we have going on and expand upon them. As a freelance musician myself, I am very aware of how much opportunity we have for growth in terms of membership among freelance musicians. I believe the current drives we have going on among local theatre musicians can give us the momentum and experience we need to organize more musicians in the area.

With every right we hold dear under attack from our current administration, the dignity, safety, and wellbeing of our union members and families are at serious risk. In the face of the ICE immigration crackdown, the undermining of the NLRB, the breaking up of federal unions, the ending of affirmative action, increasing discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, the renormalization of blatant racism in public discourse, and the continued complicity of our government in the genocide of Palestinians, the cost of standing on the sidelines grows by the day. If we don't stand up now, then when? As Vice President of Local 56, I will do everything I can to address both the day-to-day and broader interests of Local 56 members.

CANDIDATE STATEMENT/VICE PRESIDENT

My name is **Kevin Murphy**. I have been a proud member of Local 56 for 55 years. As a lifelong musician, I have built a career as a saxophonist, guitarist, and vocalist, performing across the country and around the world. Some of my highlights include performing with James Brown, leading my band Murphy's Law for 35 years, working as a solo entertainer, and playing with Just Friends band (which is made up of Local 56 members). I earned a bachelor's degree from Aquinas College and studied at the Guitar Institute of Technology in Hollywood,



California. Alongside my career, I've given back by donating performances for homeless shelters, veterans, and the religious community.

I have served as Vice President of Local 56 for the past 6 years and as a board member for 16 years. In these roles, I've worked on contract negotiations, event organizing, and outreach to both members and the wider labor community. I have worked on building strong relationships not only within our own union but also with other unions, such as affiliates of the Kent-Ionia Labor Council (which represents 33 local labor organizations) and larger unions like the United Auto Workers (to collaborate on events like Labor Fest).

To me, the heart of leadership lies in maintaining open communication with our members and ensuring that every Local 56 musician, regardless of the genre they play or whether they're covered by a collective bargaining agreement or working as a freelancer, is valued, heard, and represented. I have taken every opportunity to serve our membership, including being a union representative at auditions for the Grand Rapids and Lansing Symphonies. I have also actively and tirelessly advocated for freelance musicians by promoting higher wages, expanding work opportunities, resolving contract and employment disputes, and ensuring that all musicians receive timely and fair compensation for their work.

Looking ahead, my priorities are to provide stronger support for working musicians, expand opportunities for both younger and veteran members, and strengthen the financial stability of our Local. I believe in fairness, collaboration, and most importantly getting to know members on a personal level: their goals, their dreams, and their needs as professional musicians. The union has been an important part of my own career, and I want to make sure others can benefit from it just as I have. As the Vice President, I will continue to bring dedication, continuity, and openness to this important position.

I would be honored to continue serving as your Vice President, and I respectfully ask for your support in the upcoming election.

CANDIDATE STATEMENT/MEMBER-AT-LARGE



My name is **Jonathan Reed**, and I am currently Principal Bass of the Grand Rapids Symphony. I have played Principal Bass the last four years and Section Bass the three years prior. Born and raised in Southwest Michigan, I am proud to call West Michigan home. I just finished a two-year appointment as Treasurer on the Grand Rapids Symphony's Orchestra Committee (2023-25). Years before, I served on the Orchestra Committee for the Lansing Symphony Orchestra.

While orchestral music is my main focus, I also greatly enjoy learning and playing both solo and chamber music repertoire. In addition to classical mu-

sic, folk, early music, bluegrass, singer/songwriter, funk, and jazz are among my favorite music genres. Nurturing the next generation of audiences for live music is extremely important to me. I teach a small private bass studio at my home in Jenison and participate in the Low Strings Discovery Trio that works in Grand Rapids area schools, offering introductions and hands-on playing experiences of orchestral instruments to students.

I am running for the Local 56 Executive Board Member-at-Large position because I have seen first hand the impact and importance the union has had in my past AFM memberships in Houston (Local 65-699), Ann Arbor (Local 625), and Lansing/Grand Rapids (Local 56). The union consistently has our back in fighting for fair wages in our industry, while also being an immense support of opportunities in the community. As a musician and union member, I want to deepen my understanding of what Local 56 can do for our current members while also working to grow our membership and presence in the community. Thank you for your time and consideration.

CANDIDATE STATEMENT/MEMBER-AT-LARGE

Hello! My name is **Clara Schubilske**, and I am running for Member-at-Large in the upcoming union elections.

I have been a violinist in the Grand Rapids Symphony since 2023. It has been so inspiring to see and learn about everything that the leadership and members of the Local 56 Executive Board have done to strengthen the organization and build trust and unity with the musicians in this area. I would love to be a part of that and to learn what goes into assisting with all the hard work behind the scenes to ensure that things are running smoothly.



I think I have an extra appreciation for union organizing, since I come from a family of musician advocates. As the chair of the Minnesota Orchestra's Musicians Committee, my mother was instrumental in resolving their lockout of 2013-14. She has shared much of her wisdom with me, and I hope to one day make a positive impact on my community as well, especially since I have been so fortunate to have met so many amazing, kind, and welcoming people here in West Michigan and want to help maintain a strong union for all of us.

CANDIDATE STATEMENT

ALTERNATE DELEGATE/AFM CONVENTION

My name is ..., **Charles C. Johnson**. I am a Classical/Jazz Double String and Electric Bassist from Muskegon. I am the Founder, Band Leader and Bassist for Kw'est Productions LLC. I have been a member of the AFM/Local #56 since July 7th, 1994. I serve as an Executive Trustee for the (WMBS) West Michigan Blues Society. As well..., I am a member of the (WMJS) West Michigan Jazz Society. As a Grammy Associate I appear on (9) CD recording projects. Since my relocation from Memphis, TN the fall of 2013, I was elected by my peers to serve our community of musicians as an Executive Officer, as well as an Alternate Convention Delegate for West Michigan. With your loyal support, It would be an honor to serve each you again for a 4th term.



As one of your elected Alternate Convention Delegates, it would be my responsibility to ..., "have direct involvement in Union Governance, Substitute for a Primary Delegate, be the Voice for our Local #56." Along with significant networking opportunities it would be my responsibility to ..., "connect with musicians across America, Engage with Union Leadership, Share information with our Local." As well be a TRUE ADVOCATE for our Musicians Rights by..., "the influence of key issues, support legislative efforts and contribute to our Unions overall mission."

Grant me the opportunity to continue the work that we have collectively started for the benefit of ALL of our AFM Local #56 members. Sharing the vital information gained from theses annual conferences and conventions offers each of us more connections, resources, and support within our musical community of West Michigan.

CANDIDATE STATEMENT

ALTERNATE DELEGATE/AFM CONVENTION

Hello, Local 56 membership.

My name is **Robert Johnson**, and I am a double bass player in the Grand Rapids Symphony and a Member-at-Large (GRS Representative) on the Local 56 Executive Board. In my short time serving on the Executive Board, I have learned so much, both about how this institution functions and how much more there is to learn. I am running to be Local 56's Alternate Delegate to the AFM Convention because I want to continue learning about how to serve our membership. If elected, I look forward to the opportunity to trade ideas with and learn from those most active in the service of musicians and organized labor as a whole. I hope you'll consider voting for me as your Alternate Delegate.



CANDIDATE STATEMENT

ALTERNATE DELEGATE/AFM CONVENTION



Hello everyone, and thank you for considering me to be your Alternate Delegate to the next AFM Convention. My name is **Jack Latta**, and I have been a member of the Grand Rapids Symphony since 2017, as a member of the percussion section until 2023, and as the Principal Percussionist since then. In that time, I have served on the Local 56 Executive Board, on the Orchestra Committee and Negotiation

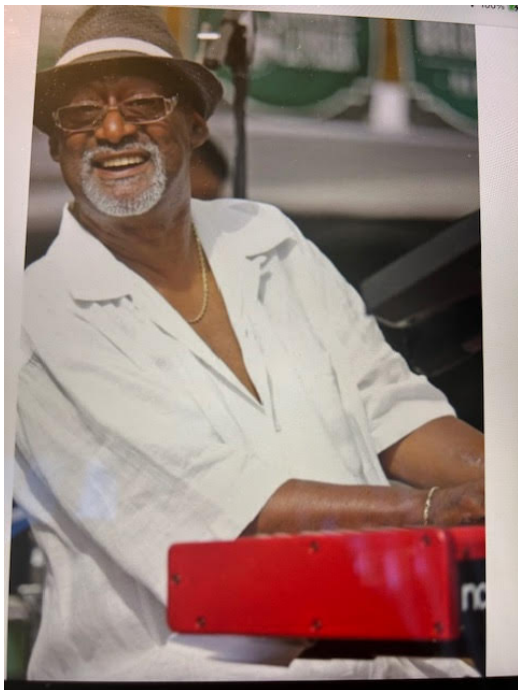
Committee for the Grand Rapids Symphony musicians, as a musician representative on the Grand Rapids Symphony Board of Directors, as the GRS Delegate to the International Conference of Symphony and Opera Musicians (ICSOM), and

now as a Member-at-Large of the ICSOM Governing Board. My experience has given me the skills and context needed to serve the musicians of Local 56 well as a Delegate to the AFM Convention, if an Alternate is needed. Thank you, again, for your consideration.

CANDIDATE STATEMENT

ALTERNATE DELEGATE/AFM CONVENTION

Hi! My name is **Adam McMillan**, and I'm currently the keyboard player and band manager of the Asamu Johnson and the Associates of The Blues band. I'm also CEO of Just Friends Music & Entertainment.



I discovered my passion for music by being serenaded by my father's voice as a child. Encouraged by my parents, they started me with piano lessons at the age of 10. By middle school, I started playing with my first bands (Youngblood, Total Eclipse). Then, in high school, I played with The Funka Sonics Band from the mid to late 1970's. After leaving for California in the early 1980's, and not returning to Michigan until the 1990's, I didn't play music anymore until I met up with some of my old band mates in the late 2000's. Some of them were still performing, and I started to rekindle my love for music. Now I've been playing with Asamu since 2014. We've

recorded two CD's with Asamu, and I have learned a lot (and am still learning) about building relationships with potential clients, doing public relations, budgeting, marketing, and management.

Since joining the musicians union, going on three years now, I've learned and met some amazing people who have taught and helped me so much. I'm hoping to learn a lot more by being elected as an Alternate Delegate to the AFM Convention. I believe my best and strongest attributes are my communication skills and my one-on-one relationships with people.

GRFM SCHOLARSHIP FUND

Violist Alexander Chung was the recipient of this year's \$600 Madura scholarship, which allowed him to attend the Intensive Viola Week at the Interlochen Center for the Arts in June. Upon returning, Alex sent a message of appreciation to Local 56.

"Attending the Interlochen Summer Intensive Viola Camp was one of the most meaningful experiences of my high school years. Being surrounded by talented musicians inspired me to practice with greater discipline and to set higher goals for myself. Through daily lessons, chamber rehearsals, and orchestra performances, I not only strengthened my technique but also discovered the importance of listening and collaborating with others."

"Regular performances helped me overcome stage nerves and built my confidence as a violist. Most importantly, Interlochen deepened my love for music and showed me the joy of sharing it with others. The experience was both inspiring and transformative, motivating me to continue growing as a musician and as a person."



The Donald A. Armstrong, Thomas A. Erickson, and Robert Madura scholarships provide funds for talented young musicians who live within the Local 56 area. Tax deductible donations from our members and friends provide funding for these scholarships, and this link gives details: <https://grandrapidsmusicians.org/resources/>

Thank you, Local 56 members, for your consideration in making an end-of-the-year donation to the GRFM Scholarship Fund.

MPTF FAMILY SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

The 2025 MPTF Music Family Scholarships were awarded to college students from 45 AFM Locals, included the children of two Local 56 members. Applicants wrote essays describing how they would organize a free community event that fosters unity and blends arts and culture.

We congratulate the two recipients from Local 56, Jaden Knapp and Dana DeLellis, and wish them the best in their college studies.



Student: Jaden Knapp

**Parent: Fred Knapp
Local 56 Member since 2000**



Student: Dana DeLellis

**Parent: Anthony DeLellis
Local 56 Member since 2010**

MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT BENNIE KEYS

Happy fall, everyone.

I am still on Cloud Nine after last month's 120th anniversary event. I really enjoyed presenting AFM pins and certificates to many of our members, as well as being presented with my 25-year AFM Local 56 membership pin.

It was my most honored privilege to recognize long-time members Gretchen Weaver, who has been in our Local for 65 years, and Phil Hamacher, for his 58 years as a Local 56 member. In addition, it was wonderful to present 50-year AFM Local 56 membership pins to Michael Bowman, Michael Hyde, Kevin Murphy, Ava Ordman, Gary Sironen, Collette Vandenberg, and David Wells. The entire day was incredible, and a special thanks to all of our Executive Board members, and especially Paul Austin, for their tireless work towards this special day. It was nice to see all of you and your family members who attended to see you perform and receive your awards. I was glad to have this chance to interact with so many of you who I haven't seen in a very long time.



Just a reminder that we are having another organizing meeting for freelance theatre musicians on Tuesday, October 14th, at 5:00 pm, on the 4th Floor of the Masonic Center. Please invite any musicians you know who have played in the pit orchestra of the Grand Rapids Civic Theater or Circle Theatre. We are having AFM Field Organizer Leni Kreienberg from the National coming to help us get better prepared to take the next steps.

Thanks, everyone!



NOTES FROM SECRETARY-TREASURER PAUL AUSTIN

Last month, I witnessed a number of amazing moments for Local 56 that are worth sharing with all of you here.

The wind ensemble that performed on our 120th Anniversary Celebration pulled off an incredible feat. This talented group of musicians, led by conductor John Varineau, whipped together a program of music by four American composers in record time, including the premiere of a fanfare by Local 56 member Greg Scheer. Bravo!

The next impressive moment that I observed is in regards to our upcoming Local 56 election. To the best of my knowledge, this may be the first time that we have had multiple candidates running for every available position on our Executive Board. To me, this shows that Local 56 is viewed as an important organization, one that members would be proud to serve at this time.

Finally, the teamwork displayed by our Executive Board members at the 120th Anniversary Celebration was inspiring. We arrived at Wealthy Theatre for set up at 8am and stayed until 9pm for tear down. Stage Manager Charles Johnson maintained order so that our event stayed on time, and it did! In addition to Charles Johnson, a heartfelt thanks goes to my dedicated colleagues Barbara Corbató, Carsten Forester, Christina Fong, Robert Johnson, Sterling Jenkins, Bennie Keys, and Kevin Murphy. Well done, all!



Grand Rapids
Federation of Musicians

OCTOBER MEETING
PIZZA! BEER!!
SPECIAL GUEST!!!



Tuesday, October 14th, 5:00 pm
Masonic Center/Fourth Floor
233 Fulton Street East
Grand Rapids MI 49503



All are invited to attend our upcoming AFM Local 56 meeting, featuring a guest presenter from the NY office, AFM Field Organizer Leni Kreienberg, who will be speaking with freelance musicians who play in West Michigan theaters.

We hope to see you there! (Did we mention free pizza and beer?)

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