

FALL 2026 NEWSLETTER

Grand Rapids Federation of Musicians/AFM Local 56

Welcome to AFM Local 56,
Traverse City Philharmonic Musicians!



Following an effective organizing campaign, the musicians of the Traverse City Philharmonic voted overwhelmingly to become members of AFM Local 56.

This organizing effort occurred over a period of four months when a musician-led committee, supported by the AFM's Organizing Department and Local 56, conducted one-on-one conversations with their colleagues to discuss concerns and the possibility of union representation. By joining the AFM, the Traverse City Philharmonic musicians gain collective representation to address the orchestra's artistic and operational future.

Congratulations to the Traverse City Philharmonic musicians on their grassroots campaign for union membership, and we send our best wishes to them as they currently prepare to negotiate their first collective bargaining agreement.

FIVE QUESTIONS FOR TC PHIL'S KAYLEE ERLEWEIN

It all started on a Saturday afternoon last April, when violinist Kaylee Erlewein emailed AFM Local 56 with the idea of organizing the Traverse City Philharmonic (TC Phil) Musicians. Without Kaylee's involvement, this grassroots undertaking would not have happened. We asked Kaylee five questions about this campaign, and we thank her very much for being the driving force behind this effort.

1) What led you to decide to contact Local 56 about exploring AFM membership for the TC Phil Musicians?

My experience on the Players' Committee and my conversations with musicians led me to see a lot of loopholes and issues in our Master Agreement. We did not have any real power to enact change and management seemed to realize that. They would not follow through on changes they said they would implement, and we had no real recourse to hold them accountable since we had no legal or financial backing.

Last season I joined AFM Local 56 and returned to playing as a substitute with other orchestras downstate. I saw how different certain things could be and what could be better for the TC Phil. Over the past year I felt that the support to unionize seemed stronger, so I wrote to Paul Austin and he responded the same day. We were off and running the next week with the guidance of an AFM Internal Organizer!



2) What is your background with the Traverse City Philharmonic (TC Phil)?

I grew up in Traverse City so the TC Phil/TSO has been a part of most of my life. At age 11, I auditioned for the Youth Orchestra that existed at the time, TYSO, and made it! Two years later, I was their concertmaster. The following year, I left

to attend Interlochen Arts Academy from 2002-06. However, I continued to coach smaller chamber groups and sectionals for the younger groups so my siblings could be in the programs as well. After graduating high school, I started subbing with the Traverse Symphony Orchestra, as it was known at the time, and throughout my years at Michigan State. After obtaining my degree, I moved back to Traverse City, met my husband, and became a core member. Needless to say, it is my "home" orchestra in every way.

3) What do you hope to accomplish, both short-term and long-term, as a unionized orchestra?

My first short-term goal is to get a strong CBA in place for all musicians. My greatest hope is that the musicians are treated fairly moving forward and that the TC Phil, as an organization and symphony, can live up to its full potential. There seems to be a lack of respect for those that have devoted decades of their lives to the orchestra, as well as for the experience and expertise that musicians of the orchestra possess. There are many musicians that feel intimidated by management. I hope that musicians will feel safer speaking up, knowing that so many of their colleagues have their back. We deserve standards and language that is enforceable, protective, and does not allow for multiple standards depending on the whim of the management.

4) Was there a memorable moment during your campaign to join the AFM?

Honestly, there were many memorable conversations. During the dozens of one-on-one conversations with colleagues, I was amazed by the openness and trust they placed in me. The support and gratitude for our efforts was inspiring and kept me motivated.

5) Is there one piece of advice that you would give to a group that is considering to follow in your footsteps and become a union shop?

Make sure you have the motivation and energy to devote the time – and "just do it!" Our strength comes in our connection and numbers. I know my colleagues better and have made close friends through this process. It is not always comfortable reaching out to people you haven't spoken with often, but it allows you to learn more about people you see all the time. People will amaze you with their openness and honesty.

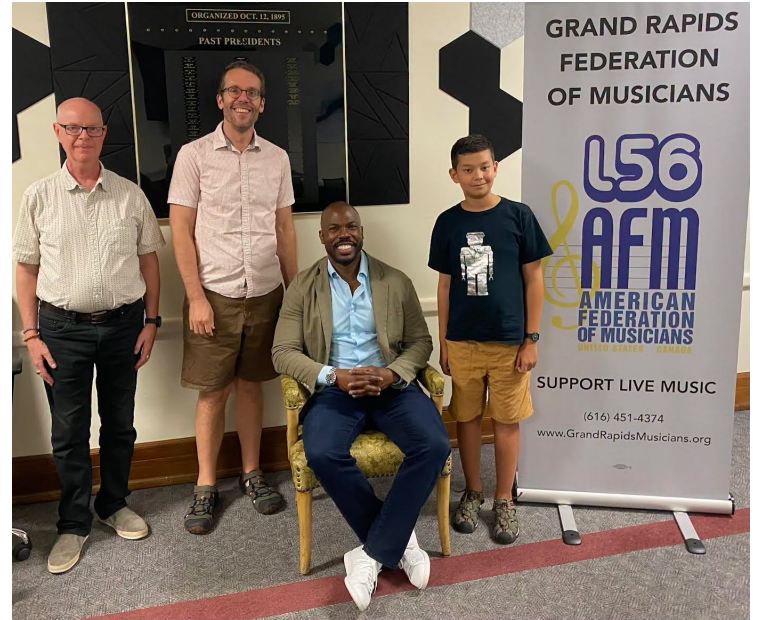
END-OF-SUMMER PHOTO GALLERY

Here are pictures from three AFM Local 56 events which occurred in August and September 2026.

First, our **"Let's Talk" Meeting** on August 3rd was an informal gathering for AFM Local 56 members, providing an opportunity to exchange ideas with their elected Executive Board members and bond over pizza and refreshments.



Next, our **Question & Answer Session with Joseph Conyers** on August 27th gave us an opportunity to hear from our former Local 56 member, now Principal Bassist of the Philadelphia Orchestra and a member of AFM Local 77-274. Open to the general public, Joseph spoke about his background and career, thoughts on music education, and ways in which symphony musicians can be unified.



Finally, we co-sponsored a **Labor Day Union Picnic** on September 7th, which was also a celebration of our 121st Anniversary as an AFM Local. Thanks to all who attended and participated in these three end-of-summer events!



NOVEMBER MEMBERSHIP MEETING



Local 56 members are encouraged to attend our annual membership meeting:

Tuesday, NOV 10th, 5pm to 7pm
Masonic Center's West Dining Room (4th Floor)
233 Fulton Street East, Grand Rapids MI 49503

The following will be recognized for reaching milestones with AFM Local 56:

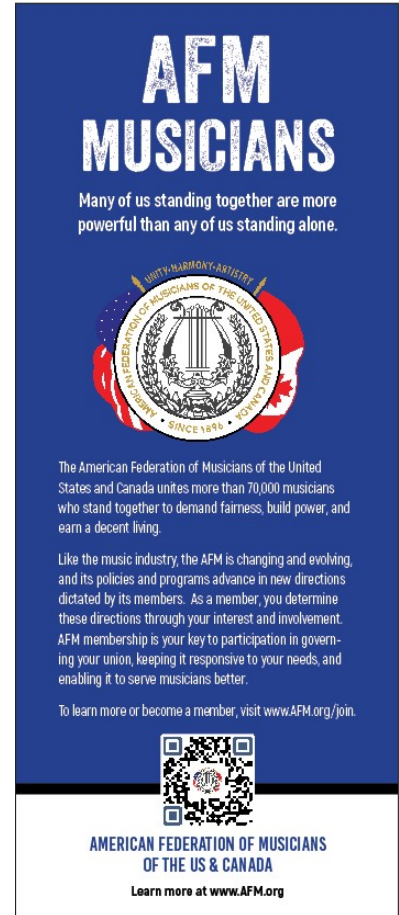
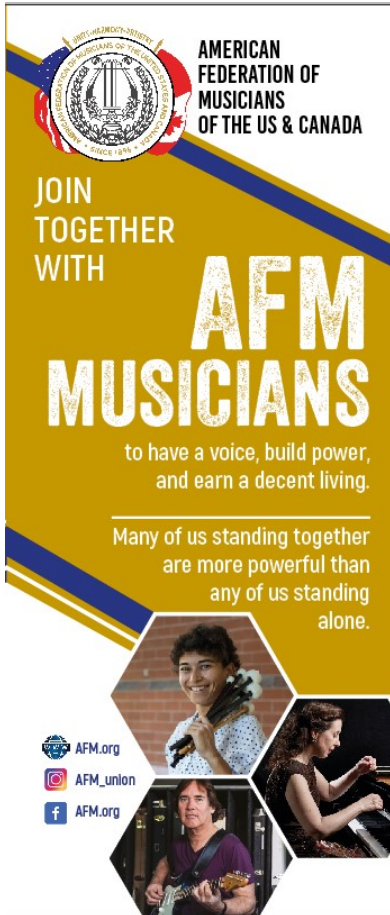
50-year anniversary: Christopher Kantner, Judith Kempf, Eric Vander Stel.
Life membership: Richard Britsch, Terrence Lower, Chris Martin, Laurie Sears.
25-year anniversary: Becky Buyze, John Clapp, Beth Colpean, Tricia Ruffer,
Ellen Sherman, Paul Spaulding.

Candidates running for the available Member at Large position on our Executive Board have been invited to speak at the meeting, and our 2026 Musician of the Year award will be presented. Resolutions to our bylaws (provided via email in advance to all members) will be discussed and voted upon at the meeting, too.

Local 56 will provide pizza and refreshments. Free parking will be available in the Masonic Center's lot (on the corner of Fulton Street and Lafayette Avenue).

MEMBERSHIP DRIVE

Local 56 is currently conducting a recruitment campaign for new and returning members. We are waiving the Federation initiation fee (\$65), the Local initiation fee (\$30), and the AFM reinstatement fee (\$10) for anyone who joins or rejoins AFM Local 56 by December 31st. We'll also throw in a free Local 56 t-shirt, too!



Of special note is that, at last summer's convention, the AFM passed a resolution stating that members who belong to two or more AFM Locals can apply directly to the AFM to receive a rebate in the amount of their annual per capita dues.

If you know any professional musicians who would benefit from membership in AFM Local 56, 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 four available positions on the Local 56 Executive Board closed at midnight on September 1, 2026.

Three of the positions only had one candidate running for office. Therefore, as stated in our bylaws, the following have been elected by acclamation:

**Paul Austin (Secretary/Treasurer/Delegate to the AFM Convention),
Robert Johnson (Member at Large/Lansing Symphony Orchestra),
Jonathan Reed (Member at Large/Grand Rapids Symphony).**

There are three members running for the Member at Large position:

Christina Fong, Adam McMillan, Eric Vander Stel.

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

October 2026: Candidate statements from each nominee appeared in the Fall 2026 Local 56 newsletter, along with their photo.

November 10, 2026: The candidates have been invited to speak at the Fall Local 56 Membership Meeting, beginning at 5:00pm, at the Masonic Center.

November 12, 2026: 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 7, 2026: Completed ballots must be returned via mail, or in person to the Local 56 office, on or before this date.

December 8, 2026: Ballots will be tallied by the Election Committee that evening, after the Local 56 Executive Board meeting. The result of the election will be communicated via email to the Local 56 membership. The term of office will begin January 2027.

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

Member at Large Candidate Statement/Christina Fong

I am honored to seek election as a Member at Large on the Executive Board of Local 56. I have been a proud AFM member since 1988 and have belonged to three locals



throughout my career: Miami, Detroit, and Grand Rapids. For the past two terms, I have served as the Lansing Symphony Representative on the Executive Board, and prior to that I served two terms as a Member at Large. As a member of the Grand Rapids Symphony, I have also served on various committees, including the negotiating committee during one of the most challenging contract negotiations.

Throughout my service, whether as a musician with the Grand Rapids Symphony, Member at Large (L56), or the Member at Large (Lansing), I have al-

ways fought for all musicians. As one who has worked under several collective bargaining agreements (CBA), I understand the importance of CBAs and the protections they provide. I remain committed to organizing and supporting strong CBAs wherever possible. At the same time, I understand the unique challenges faced by freelance musicians who do not have these protections. I have advocated for members who were not properly compensated, helping them recover wages they had earned, and I have assisted members in accessing Petrillo Fund benefits when illness prevented them from working. One of the accomplishments of which I am most proud occurred eight years ago, when I spearheaded efforts to increase Local 56's freelance minimum wage scales. This year, I drafted bylaw language to ensure those rates automatically increase in the future to reflect changes in the cost of living.

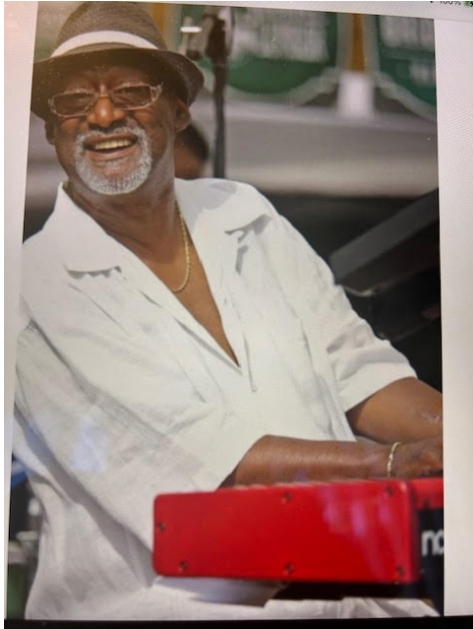
I continue to educate myself on labor, industry, and political issues affecting musicians, while never forgetting that we are both artists and professionals. Too often, the public celebrates the musician while overlooking the professional whose labor deserves respect, fair compensation, and protection. If elected, I will continue to work tirelessly for our membership, remain accountable to you, and advocate for the interests of every member of Local 56. I would be honored to have your vote.

Before closing, I want to express my respect for the other candidates. I do not really think of them as opponents. I have known and worked with them for many years, and I value their dedication to our profession and our union. No matter the outcome of this election, I look forward to continuing our work together on behalf of the musicians of AFM Local 56.

(NOTE: Photo Credit William McEwen.)

Member at Large Candidate Statement/Adam McMillan

Hello, my Local 56 union musician family! My name is **Adam McMillan**. I'm the manager and keyboard player for the band Asamu Johnson & The Associates Of The Blues.



I'm also the owner of Just Friends Music & Entertainment. In addition, I am on the board of the West Michigan Blues Society. I've been a proud member of Local 56 going on four years now, and I have learned a lot about the AFM during that time.

I've been with Asamu Johnson & The Associates of the Blues since 2013/14. Actually, Asamu and I were in a band back in the mid 70's, until I decided to go out west and live in California. I stopped playing music for about 25 years until I reconnected with some of my friends from the 70s who were still playing, and I decided to get back into playing again. So I slowly started to practice and listened to other bands. One day I ran into Asamu. He said he had started a blues band and asked if I was interested.

As they say, the rest is history. One of the main duties of being a band manager is to communicate with people. For that, you have to be a people person, which I believe that I am.

As I've been told, one of the duties for the Member at Large position is to communicate with the members to find out what their concerns are and to present them to the board. Being a Member at Large would also involve reaching out to potential new members. We have played at a lot of venues around West Michigan, and I have seen a lot of musicians who are not in the AFM. Some of them ask me why am I in the union. My response is that the union offers so much more than just being a freelance musician. The union will back you on contracts and negotiations to get you better pay, as well as offer you a benefit that you would not receive by just being a freelance musician. One of the questions that I get from some musicians is if the union will get them gigs. I explain to them that the union is not a booking agency, but we do have a registry with your name that you could get called for a gig.

One of my main goals is to get more musicians to join our union, to be sure that they stay on top of their dues, and to talk to them about their concerns and what their needs are. I want to thank you for your time and hope that you will consider me for the AFM Local 56 Member at Large position. United we stand in solidarity!

Member at Large Candidate Statement/Eric Vander Stel

Hello! I am running for Executive Board Member at Large for AFM Local 56.

My experience as the former AFM Local 56 President prepares me for many roles and situations of the Local.

Should I be elected, my experience with the CBAs and freelance musicians will be useful.

Growth of the membership and community presence will also be addressed in suggestions to the board.

Thank you!

Eric Vander Stel



MPTF FAMILY SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

The 2026 Music Family Scholarships have been awarded to college students from 45 AFM Locals, included the children of two Local 56 members.

To receive this \$1,000 award from the Music Performance Trust Fund, applicants wrote personal essays which were scored on originality and screened for an over-reliance on AI writing tools.

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



Parent: Fred Knapp
AFM Local 56 Member
since 2000



Parent: Anthony DeLellis
AFM Local 56 Member
since 2010

MESSAGE FROM PRESIDENT BENNIE KEYS

Happy fall, everyone.

Since my last article, we have added the Traverse City Philharmonic to Local 56. We are still working to get everything in order, but it's coming along just great. So, let's welcome them with open arms.

This past August, Secretary/Treasurer Paul Austin and Members at Large Christina Fong and Robert Johnson joined me for a trip to Lansing to attend the LSO's Concert in the Park. It was so great to meet and greet with the LSO musicians, although the weather didn't cooperate. We had a fun time before it poured down on us! This was our third consecutive year to co-sponsor the LSO's summer park concert, with funds from the Music Performance Trust Fund.

Last month, I had the pleasure of seeing our world-class Grand Rapids Symphony in action for their opening night concert. It really was delightful!

Throughout the summer, I have had the opportunity to see many of our Local 56 casual musicians out and about, making music and connecting with lifelong fans!

We had several Local 56 members participate in the Labor Day Union Picnic. I want to be sure to thank Executive Board members Carsten Forester, Robert Johnson, Christina Fong, Paul Austin, and Barbara Corbató, for coming out and adding their talents to this event. Robert Johnson played a big role with the food, which Local 56 provided, and Carsten Forester sang some great labor songs. Thanks again to all who came out to make this a huge success!

I am overwhelmed by all of the dedicated members who share their time and efforts to make Local 56 one of the greatest Locals in the AFM!





NOTES FROM SECRETARY/TREASURER PAUL AUSTIN

Our Executive Board members were invited to attend a political rally in September and sit in a section designated for leaders of organized labor. We did so and spent the evening in a crowd of 1,500 attendees to hear from the featured candidate, as well as those from the floor who asked questions.

The American Federation of Musicians (AFM), our parent organization, has always advised us to support political candidates who support labor, which is what we were doing in this case. It just so happens that this candidate at last month's event is on the Democratic ticket. Know that when any politicians emerge who have a pro-union

stance, we plan to be in support of them, regardless of party affiliation.

What does it mean for us to support pro-union candidates? It means that we will back candidates who are committed to our efforts to negotiate union contracts that provide a middle-class quality of life.

Remember that the AFM is a labor organization and a member of the AFL-CIO.



AFM Local 56 Membership Meeting

Tuesday, NOV 10th, 5pm-7pm

West Dining Room/Masonic Center

Honor Local 56 members with 50-year and 25-year anniversaries

Presentation of our 2026 Musician of the Year award

Discuss and vote upon our bylaw amendments

Meet the candidates for our Local 56 election

Recognize our new Life Members

Enjoy free pizza with us afterwards

HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE!

233 Fulton Street E, 4th Floor, Grand Rapids MI 49503

AFM Local 56 aims to protect the interest and welfare of its members, to establish a minimum scale of prices to be charged for professional services, and to promote good faith and fair dealings between its members. We signed our charter with the American Federation of Musicians on September 7, 1905, and our jurisdiction includes central, west, and northern Michigan. Currently, AFM Local 56 has over 330 members.

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