



## NORMANITE IN THE SPOTLIGHT

# Richard Zielinski

to his mother, Betty Zielinski (Mama Z), a “saint” who could make anyone feel safe.

The Zielinski kids were always entertaining at their family piano, the big picture window in their living room reflecting the jubilation back at them, while faith and music brought everyone together.

The troop would sing Rodgers and Hammerstein; Bob Dylan; Blood, Sweat & Tears; Chicago; the Doobie Brothers; and the Beatles. And when they weren’t creating their own music, they spun classical music on the record player belonging to their father, Dick Zielinski. That young boy listening to classical music on his father’s record player had no idea he would grow up to conduct works of Beethoven in the very same places as the German composer.

“I used to think, ‘Oh, I remember my dad playing this music!’ but I didn’t know it then,” Zielinski said. “I always thought it was so beautiful. I would listen to (Johann) Strauss waltzes or Beethoven symphonies or (Giacomo) Puccini operas or barbershoppers. My dad just loved music.”

Zielinski dedicated himself to honing his skills in sports and music the only way he knew how: by putting in the practice. Greatness isn’t achieved without hard work, and that was apparent to him at a young age.

“If my mom were here, she’d tell you: She’d have to unscrew the lightbulb at 2 in the morning because I was in my driveway practicing,” he said. “You have to put the time in, then you’ll reap the benefits of that. But I never felt like it was work. I would walk through a hip-deep snow and I’d be the one at the gym door and my coach would say, ‘Yeah, I figured you’d be here.’ I just loved it.”

Zielinski instills in his students the importance of working hard, so much so

**T**ime — there’s nothing in this world more fleeting than time.

That’s the impression you get talking to Richard Zielinski — or Dr. Z, depending on what circles you run in. The University of Oklahoma’s director of choral activities and conductor of the Norman Philharmonic is the definition of how to live when you’re acutely aware that time is never promised.

Also director of music ministries at McFarlin Memorial United Methodist Church in Norman, Zielinski is very much a “let’s get this show on the road” kind of guy. Punctual and deliberate, the 58-year-old has seen great loss in his life, having lost his father when he was 19 and his mother when he was 25 years old.

“There’s probably a little voice in me saying, ‘Hey, we might shut this show down any day, so you might as well live it now — let’s go!’” he said. “So I have no patience, really, for any of this ‘I don’t want to do this today.’ You’re breathing, it’s a beautiful day, you’re making music with people you love — let’s live it.”

### MAKINGS OF A MUSICIAN

Zielinski grew up in the blue collar town of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. The star athlete and self-professed “gym rat” dreamed of competing in the Olympics and of playing for the New York Knicks, fostering a love of music all the while. The youngest brother to three sisters, Zielinski grew up in a home that served as a haven for so many in the tight-knit community. Many, he said, were drawn

### Richard Zielinski (Dr. Z)

**Married to:** Cathy Griffin

**Pets:** Cats Maestro, Leopold and Nikolaus

**Best known for:**

- **Professor, University of Oklahoma; director of music ministries**
- **McFarlin United Methodist Church; conductor**
- **Norman Philharmonic; music and artistic director**
- **Classical Music Festival**

**Hobbies:** Golf

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that students can quote, word for word, one of Zielinski’s favorite leaders, the famed basketball coach John Wooden.

“He adheres to the quote from the great coach John Wooden: ‘There is no substitute for hard work,’” recited John Morrow, an OU masters student in choral conducting and OU chorale accompanist and principal organist at McFarlin Church.

“You look at the work he does at OU, at McFarlin, with the Norman Philharmonic; he’s never chasing glory for himself. He is always making music to give something greater meaning, whether for a cause, a worship service or the community. With that intensity, however, he brings this incredible level of care. He is



devoted to his choirs and his students emotionally and often reminds us to support and care for each other," Morrow said.

### Faith

On Sundays, you'll find Zielinski at McFarlin, serving alongside Senior Pastor Linda Harker, someone he considers a great leader and mentor, in their vision of "changing lives that change the world."

Harker considers serving with Zielinski an honor and privilege, and she's enjoyed witnessing the deeply spiritual side of him that drives everything he does. His dedication to excellence compels him to "pull the very best out of each student, member and volunteer," she said.

"Dr. Z and I share a core belief that music can touch the soul and draw one into the presence of God in ways that other mediums can't. When the music flows from the chosen scripture and the theme of that scripture is carried out throughout the worship service through the music and liturgy, there is a cohesiveness that brings such beauty to the day.

"Music and the proclaimed word need each other. I have witnessed the transformation in our congregation as our choirs under Dr. Z's leadership have brought people closer to God. He just has this God-given ability to draw the very best out of people."

Although passion and persistence have honed his skills, Zielinski, too, considers his musical talents a gift from God. The salt-and-peppered haired man speaks with a distinguished, raspy voice, but in song, his sound transcends to something much different.

"There are times when the beauty of a piece of music has touched his soul in a way that causes tears to slowly run down his face as he directs the choir," Harker said. "I get a front row seat of witnessing the deep passion and love that compels him to pull out the very best in others in order to give his very best. It's a spiritual thing to behold."

### Finding family at OU

This summer, Zielinski plans to take about 60 students to Eisenstadt, Austria, for the Classical Music Festival Eisenstadt Summer Academy, for which he serves as the artistic director and principal conductor. His wife Cathy Griffin will serve as festival organizer as she oversees the administrative aspects.

"He's very easy to work with since he also has exceptional organizational and administrative skills in addition to his artistic ability," Griffin said. "It's been wonderful to share this experience and to be able to offer it to the hundreds of student and adult musicians who attend each year."

When it comes to teaching, Zielinski considers it his life's calling. In fact, he has 32 years of higher education instruction under his belt.

He looks back on milestones in his life that changed him for the better — switching from one college to another to pursue music over athletics, and traveling to Japan to teach for a year. He said he wants his students to be just as open-minded in their pursuits throughout college and throughout life, to be willing to take a chance that could open them up to new opportunities that lie beyond whatever path is carved out for them.

"I want them to do everything," Zielinski said.

He considers himself to have a pretty good sense of humor too, and he must be right because students like Morrow cite that as one of their favorite things about him.

"It's wonderful to see him interact with young musicians and children," Morrow added. "We might walk past a group of kids at church singing 'Jesus Loves Me,' and he'll join in and make a funny face at them!"

Mary Margaret Holt, dean of the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts, described Zielinski as a "powerhouse of energy and passion where music is concerned" and said Zielinski's skills as an educator and conductor have benefited students throughout the college.

"Having worked with him on several projects (two of them performed at OU and in Austria), I was struck by his dedication to each project and the energy and passion with which he works," Holt said.

### Keeping time

His days on the basketball court and football field behind him, Zielinski finds himself strolling golf courses like the Jimmie Austin Golf Course at OU and strategizing and melodizing while he swings.

"You get to my age and you can't play basketball anymore, and you sure as heck can't play football," Zielinski said with a laugh. "Golf takes a lot of strategy, a lot of discipline, and you're playing against yourself. I love that."

And, believe it or not, while he's steeped in solitude on the golf course, he's running golf matches and conducting symphonies in his head, drawing up a melody to the swing.

Brrrrrum bum bum, schoom!

Always keeping time. — BSM