

## Westmount Profile: Nigel Penney

# Awakening the spirit of inquiry

BY LAUREN SWEENEY

He was 10 when he chose to learn a musical instrument to get out of a second math course at a British boarding school. But much to Nigel Penney's dismay, the "cool" instruments – drums, trumpet and guitar – were already taken. He was left with the violin.

It turned out to be harder than math, he says, "and so began the adventure."

Out of his effort grew a passion for music that drove his school days, shadowed his 25-year career in information technology and project management, and now enables him to play and teach violin to those aged 6 to 96.

Even more significant, perhaps, is his firsthand understanding of the need to inspire children and make learning a fun experience. This is his mission as director of the first Marianopolis science camp. It will be held in July and targets ages 11 to 15.

"The goal is to wake up the spirit of inquiry," he says.

Without the violin, he might have

dropped out, he says. "I took it up for all the worst reasons. But it's given me such a wonderful time – even though I never turned it into a career." Music generated a love of learning that was heightened by a couple of teachers who had a profound influence on him in physics and chemistry.

While Penney's Marianopolis appointment last January to "design, develop and run" the science camp draws on all his skill sets and passions, he says, it is the excitement of the project and the prospect of turning kids on to science that fuels his energies.

### An incredible journey

"It's been an incredible journey so far," he says. "People have been falling over themselves to provide input. The team at Marianopolis, which includes Alex Polkki as the camp coordinator, has been very supportive." McGill's endorsement, he adds, has opened the door to many resources.

"When I look at kids these days and the high dropout rates," Penney says, "I see



Nigel Penney outside Marianopolis, counting down the days until the start of the science camp.

this camp as an opportunity to demonstrate how much fun we can have with science and hopefully make an impact on them one by one. We're going to build robots, a train that floats on air by magnetic levitation, and a windmill to generate wind energy."

Penney knows the age group well. He has a 15-year-old son, George, who attends Westmount High. He also has two grown daughters: Lauren, 30, who works at McGill in graduate recruitment; and Meagan, 27, who just graduated with honours in nursing in Toronto.

### Moved to Geneva

Born in London, Penney moved to Geneva as a young child when his father, Richard, became director of administration for the newly-formed European Centre for Nuclear Research (CERN) in 1953. "I was shipped off to boarding school at Highgate in London because apparently I was somewhat unruly."

Just as he was completing his "A" level exams at high school, his father and mother (Lea) came to Canada, where they lived in Westmount for many years before moving downtown.

Penney visited back and forth to Westmount while studying science at the University of Sussex. But with too much time spent on music and launching a chamber orchestra at the university, he was asked to leave.

Reinstated after a couple of years at unsatisfying jobs, he graduated with honours in 1973 and began working in chemistry at textile companies.

Coming to Canada in 1975, Penney quickly migrated to IBM in computer work, and marketing and sales, and then moved into executive positions at several

other IT companies.

"When I turned 50 – I'm 58 now – I began to reassess the value of what I had been doing," he says. "I realized I didn't want my tombstone to read born and died in such and such a year with nothing in between. I had had all the privileges in the world and decided it was time to start giving back.

"Since then, I've been focusing on the education of children and furthering their love of music. I don't do anything now that I don't love."

Penney founded a registered charitable foundation called Cycle for Children to raise funds that would enable children to learn music. An avid cyclist, he originally intended to cycle around the world, a plan he eventually replaced by encouraging small groups of musicians to hold individual fundraising events.

Along with his violin teaching, Penney also works as a computer and project management consultant – recently on a CIDA-funded technology infrastructure project for Guyana. He is also a translator and high school tutor.

But with the start of the Marianopolis camp fast approaching on July 6, his energies are dedicated to the finer details of the program and registration, which can be done online at [www.marianopolis.edu/sciencecamp](http://www.marianopolis.edu/sciencecamp).

Next year – yes, he's already thinking about that – "we're also going to provide a junior science camp for children aged 8 to 11."

And as more ideas race through his mind, Penney suddenly looks at his watch. In a flash, he's out the door, onto his bike and wheeling off to where a child is waiting to be tutored. He can't keep her waiting.

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