

# Roderick Travis Bennett and People Alike: A Tribute | Victoria Huang

Listening to the meaningless but pretty sounding music aggravated my homework-stressed mind — the noise of the looping instrumental clogged up my ears. Feeling numb and dazed, my mind suddenly recollected transient images of the gray, tufted carpet terraces of the middle school band room where I used to play the tuba. The shine of metal instruments. And then I see the figure of my middle school band teacher, Mr. Bennett, also known as Rod Bennett.

The 18th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution was proposed in 1917 and ratified in 1919 to prohibit liquor, but was later repealed in 1933 by the 21st Amendment because people could not resist the allure of liquor. I wonder if still kept in place, maybe Mr. Bennett could have been saved.

“We’re going to practice rhythms next Friday,” he said one afternoon at the end of the school day in 2016. However, this was the last band class we had together before he got hit by a drunk-driver while bicycling and died.

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I recall a blurry memory of when I had a math project due and I had not finished it yet. During class, I had sat in my chair and scribbled on a piece of paper which I had placed on the wide and curved surface of my tuba that was resting sideways on my lap. Mr. Bennett noticed: “Victoria, we aren’t doing that right now.” I put it away. Being a naive 7th grade student who only talked to teachers when need be, I did not establish a meaningful connection with Mr. Bennett when he was alive. Would I have felt happier or sadder now if I had done so?

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The drunk driver got sentenced to 10 years in prison,

but Mr. Bennett was still dead. My memories show me my English teacher, Mr. Lederman, a friend of Mr. Bennett, sitting at his desk during class, hard in thought. I read Mr. Bennett's obituary again, which states: "A Hart District instructor since 1999, Bennett taught 7th and 8th grade math at Arroyo Seco for 16 years, from 1999-2015, and began his dream gig teaching band at Arroyo Seco just this year."

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In 2024, years past 2016, I became 21 years old – the legal drinking age. In that span of time, I had set my tuba down in its case years ago, left the band, and pursued new paths. A few weeks after my 21st birthday, I drank a canned beverage, tropical punch flavor, with an alcoholic content of 4.5%. The bitter taste of the clear liquid made my mouth cringe.

Afterwards, my sight seemed a tiny bit unclear. I quantified how drunk I was with an online blood alcohol content (BAC) calculator. A warning statement by the BAC calculator tells me that at any amount of alcohol it is not safe to drive. My BAC was 0.03%, below the legal limit of 0.08%, and it was estimated that my body would process the alcohol in 2.5 hours. Sitting around, my senses dulled, I did not see the allure of liquor. Two or so hours passed, and I felt like myself. An adult person held to the same laws and responsibilities as every other legal adult.

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My numb mind knows that Mr. Bennett is gone, but I am taught more lessons by him as the years pass. In the streets of the cities, I see poles and trees with memorial decorations. Crosses, plushies, flowers, letters and notes. Daily, people die by the hands of outright intoxication and recklessness—like what happened to Mr. Bennett. Perhaps, all of the poles and trees will have these decorations eventually. Another one for someone else I know, or perhaps one for me someday. To remember death, to remember carelessness, to remember a person.

A catchphrase Mr. Bennett liked to say was "Life is a beach." Well, I have learned that life is multiple, many beaches. Initially pristine until the vandals of drunkenness crash upon them, dirtying the waters and trashing the beaches. I imagine the clinking of drink glasses almost having the same musicality of instrument notes. Here I am, a student of Mr. Bennett, still wondering about that next Friday class to practice rhythms.