

An oldie ... but still a goody

By MICHELLE SUTTON - Sunday Star Times



CHRIS SKELTON/Fairfax Media

JAMMING: Whakatane High School music teacher Albert "Ham" Cunningham, with two of his students Terence Apiata, left, and Kahurangi Hunia.

Albert Cunningham is a music teacher playing to a different beat.

The 90-year-old is the country's oldest classroom teacher, and has no plans to give up.

He entered the classroom in New Zealand at 66 – an age when most teachers are retired – having moved here from Canada.

Twenty four years on he is still teaching, taking classes in electric bass at Whakatane High School and saxophone at Kawerau College.

Mr Cunningham to his pupils and "Ham" to his colleagues, he is older than most of his students' grandparents, but says teaching keeps him young and there's never been a reason to quit.

"I love it and just kept doing it. Why make a change? You have to work," he says in his matter-of-fact way.

He occasionally falters in thought, but quickly recovers, speaking in smooth, sure tones with a hint of his Canadian twang – "how did that work out – oh yeah, so how it worked out was..." –

continuing with a never-ending supply of anecdotes, such as the time his orchestra performed for the Queen.

Keeping pace with his 13-17-year-old students is no problem, he says, but he laments the lack of discipline in today's schools. In particular, Cunningham notes a lack of respect from some students, and a carefree attitude.

"Discipline was so strict when I went to school, you didn't dare lift a finger. Now kids talk whenever they like and say whatever they want."

At times, he says, it's even worse than "the promiscuous" 1970s in Canada, when teachers were threatened by students with stabbing or shooting.

The final straw prompting him to leave was the day his son came home, saying he couldn't make friends because everyone was on dope. "So, I thought, we have to get out of here."

He read New Zealand newspapers for a year before settling on safe and warm Whangarei, where he ran a fish and chip shop and played trumpet and string bass in the occasional band. But for someone who spent four years at Canada's Royal Conservatory of Music, an approach to teach music was too good an opportunity to pass up.

He started out teaching music one day a week at five Waikato schools, and is still in the classroom.

With his emphysema under control, his health is holding up. And although he's living alone, three of his five children are nearby in Whakatane.

He dismisses talk of quitting, and vows to continue for as long as possible. "I guess I will carry on until the day I die, or until I win the Lotto."