

# Music man binds band together

Paul Parets leads Alexis I. du Pont High School to Rose Parade for 5th time

By EDWARD L. KENNEY, The News Journal

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On a hot August afternoon before the start of school, all eyes in the high school auditorium were on Parets. He kicked off band practice in mid-August this school year -- earlier than ever -- so he could whip his Tiger Marching Band at Alexis I. du Pont High School in Greenville into playing shape. The band will make a trip to Pasadena, Calif., at the end of the year for a rare fifth appearance in the "granddaddy" of parades, the 119th annual Rose Parade.

Parets, 65, called the early practice so the band can be in perfect tune when Tournament of Roses President C.L. Keedy III watches them perform during halftime at the school's Sept. 14 home football game.

Globe-hopping trips and winning performances have streamed in as steadily as a drum roll during Parets' 31-year tenure. At the beginning of the year, the Tiger Marching Band performed in Rome at the pope's annual New Year's Day address to the world. And through the years, the Tigers have marched in parades and festivals from New York City to Dublin, Ireland.

"We've won every festival we've ever been in since 1990, first place and best band in festival," Parets said.

With all those accolades, it is hard to believe he was turned down flat in 1975 when he applied for the job of director of A.I. du Pont High's marching band. Someone else got the job -- at least temporarily -- and he never found out why.

But he must have made a good impression.

The following summer, then-principal William A. Byrd visited Croswell, Mich., where Parets had been band director for 10 years at Croswell-Lexington High School. Byrd went around town to find out more about him, slyly told people he was moving there and asked about the band program because his kids liked music, Parets said. "I guess he heard good stuff," he said.

Satisfied he had the right candidate, Byrd showed up unannounced at Parets' home and offered to fly him out for a few days to visit the school, where he met students and parents -- and was offered the job over dinner at the Hotel du Pont.

"Never regretted it," Parets said. "It was probably the single best decision of my life."

But Parets' success with the band didn't happen suddenly. Instead, it has built, like a good piece of music. "I'll tell you that the key was," he said. "I gave the band to the kids. 'Truly like a family'

That decision could not have come right away. The band he inherited numbered only 95 students, a far cry from the 265 band members who are marching in California this year. The last major band leader, Bob Streckfuss, had left two years earlier to become band director at the University of Delaware, a job he still holds, and the Tiger band "had pretty much fallen apart" in his absence, Parets said.

About 1982, Parets got the idea to let the students run the show, and it has evolved from there, he said. For some time now, senior band members have been in charge of squads, selected the music and decided which trips to take. The policy was cited when Parets was picked in 1987 as Delaware Teacher of the Year, he said. But he didn't know that getting the students to accept ownership and responsibility had truly turned the Tigers around until 1990, the first year the band was picked to go to Pasadena.

Each year, just 16 bands are selected to march in the Rose Parade, based on video presentations and recommendations. So it isn't easy to get an invitation, let alone five of them -- especially when bands must wait three years before they can apply again.

"To me, what makes the band so successful is the relationship between Paul and the kids," said Reid Conley, president of the band boosters at A.I. du Pont High. "He doesn't just want them to play in the band. He wants them to play in sports and be in other activities in school. It's truly like a family."

Lindsay Taylor started last year as band-front adviser, only the third person to hold that position under Parets' tenure. She graduated from the high school in 2001, and she was in the band front as a "silk," or flag, captain, as well as a flutist.

"Some will say he's the heart and soul of this band," Taylor said of Parets. "But he would say it's the kids who are the heart and soul, and that's what makes it great."

The rapport has helped make the band a fellowship of mutual admiration, respect and fun. "We laugh a lot in this band, and I like that," Parets said. "I poke fun and the kids poke fun. They keep me humble."

The fun even spills off the playing field and onto the Internet.

On Facebook, an online social networking site, a group called "Mr. Parets Changed My Life" has almost 300 members.

"It's kind of creepy, almost, but I'm flattered," Parets said. "You just wonder what people say to each other on this site."

Here's a sample: "Pappa P has given me the best experience I could say I've had at A.I. High school," an admirer wrote from Philadelphia.

"Mr. P is the best!!!" said another group member writing from Germany.

"If you did not have Mr. Parets as a teacher or for band class ... you missed out the true experience of being an A.I. Tiger!" said a message from Delaware.

Don't be mistaken, performing for Parets is not all smiles and sunshine.

"It has been rumored that I raise my voice," said the busy band leader, who also has found the time to serve five successive terms as a Delaware City councilman.

"When you have 300 social kids, you definitely have to do something to keep them in line," said senior Colin Hutt, the band's drum major.

"Everybody doesn't command that same type of respect," added assistant drum major Patrick McBrearty, a junior. "When he yells, he yells. But it's a cross-section; that's only a part of what he does."

'Everybody knows who he is'

Bob Munyon, a mid-Atlantic sales representative for Demoulin Uniforms, has outfitted hundreds of high school, college and military bands and is often invited to performances, and has been able to compare Parets' style and effectiveness with other directors.

"He manages to get more involvement from parents and students," he said. "He figured out a long time ago how to get people involved and interested."

The tactic has helped make Parets one of the better-known band directors around, he said.

"Everybody knows who he is," Munyon said. "Everybody knows who his band is. His band is certainly the best-traveled band in Delaware. But it may be even the best-traveled band on the East Coast."

To help pay for its trips, the band receives some corporate and private donations, but supporters also hold several fundraisers and students take summer jobs to earn money, Parets said.

The attention has come despite the constant turnover inherent in school bands -- the Tigers continually rotate personnel as musicians and baton twirlers graduate every four years.

"Every year I say to the kids, 'Last year's band is history,' " said Parets, who describes his own playing ability as "mediocre" clarinet and "terrible" baritone horn. "You have to ride on your own accomplishments."

Salesianum School band Director Brian Cox, who refers to the Tigers unit as "the gold standard in Delaware," said he thinks the good music programs in the Red Clay Consolidated School District keep the talent bubbling to the top.

"They've got a great feeder program, so they've got a lot of kids in elementary and middle schools to draw from," Cox said. "They've also got the A.I. band to look forward to, so that's great motivation."

Perhaps one of the most astounding things is that Parets has never barred anyone from joining or asked anyone to leave the band because of lack of skill.

"I will never do that to a kid," he said. "I say to a kid, 'Here are the four notes you can play. On the other notes, just look like you're playing.' "

The good band vibe has helped build a fan base, and even a few would-be members. "Everyone in the school feels a connection to the band," Parets said. "I have kids from every year who say, 'Can I join the band? I'll just carry your stuff.' They just want to be a part of it."

A.I. du Pont High Principal Samuel Golder understands why.

"They pretty much put a stamp on determining the culture of the high school from a school-spirit perspective," he said. "The pageantry of their walking out at a football game on a Friday night is unable to be believed."

It has been a great ride spanning several decades. But now that Parets has reached retirement age, will he continue to march to the beat of a dozen drummers?

"There is no way it would be the same without him," McBrearty said. "Some day he's going to be retiring. I hope it's not during the time I am here."

It probably will not be soon. There is a trip to California to take. And there are no outward signs of a slowdown. But Parets said he'll know when it's time.

"I'm always amazed that, after all these years, it's still exciting to do this," he said. "But when it stops being fun for the kids, I'm out of here. And they'll let me know."

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