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Drumroll, Please!

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By LYNNE AMES

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IT began almost a year ago, with a "why not, let's try it" attitude. Then came the letter: They had been accepted. Days, weeks, months of hard work followed, practice, practice, practice, and all the while, the suspense -- would they be able to raise the money to actually make the trip?

Now it's official: The Port Chester High School Band is marching toward the Orange Bowl. Thursday, they are slated to play during halftime at Pro Player Stadium in Miami, one of only 16 high school bands nationwide on the program, and the only one from the Northeast. Tomorrow, the plan is to meet at 4 a.m. at the high school parking lot, board buses for Kennedy International Airport, then fly to Florida. Virtually as soon as they arrive the 130 students in the band and color guard will practice for three hours, even before checking in to a hotel on the outskirts of Miami.

Tuesday and Wednesday, the band -- accompanied by Robert Vitti, its director, assorted staff members and a dozen parent/chaperones -- will participate in back-to-back competitions, parades and official Orange Bowl gatherings. By the time the University of Iowa Hawkeyes and the University of Southern California Trojans battle each other on the gridiron on Thursday evening, the band will have been going almost nonstop for 72 hours. The game will be broadcast on ABC at 8 p.m., and parents and friends will be watching at home, waiting for the halftime show, for a glimpse of their hometown band's big moment. As soon as the game and post-game party are over, it's on to the airport for a 4:45 a.m. flight home.

Rigorous? Yes. Exhausting? Probably. But no one is complaining. The band is what Len Savanella, volunteer publicity chairman and father of Elizabeth, color guard, and Victoria, mellophone, calls "the pride of Port Chester." It is impossible, Mr. Savanella said, to overestimate its importance to the school's self-image.

"This is a really big thing -- I mean big," said Mr. Savanella, who by profession is owner of Chappaqua Stationery Store. "We are a diverse group. There are kids whose parents commute in suits to Manhattan, and there are kids whose parents are laborers. Some of our students come from homes where no English is spoken -- Port Chester has a large population of people from everywhere in Central and South America."

The school does well on New York State reading and math tests, he said, but lacks the image of its counterparts in the neighboring community of Rye, or other more affluent communities.

"We do a great job educating our children, but not everyone realizes that," Mr. Savanella said. "They do, however, know that Port Chester has a killer band."

The students themselves echo his sentiments. Andrew Lewensohn, freshman, tenor saxophone, said the band is something he and others start to aspire to when they are still in grade school. "You want to be part of it," Andrew said.

Oscar Hernandez, sophomore, trumpet, said, "It teaches you to work in a group -- when we do drills, everything must be precise and coordinated."

Carlos Becerra, senior, snare drums, band president, said he wanted to make band music his life's work. "I'm going to do this professionally," he said. "I'm going to march in Drum Corps International. It's what I want to do for a living."

Students start learning to play as early as fourth grade. They choose their instrument, often with the help of a teacher; there are three instrumental specialists in the elementary school. A large number of young people also take private lessons. Some parents hire professional teachers; others ask high school seniors to teach their fourth and fifth graders.

Instruments include woodwinds (clarinet, flute, piccolo and the various saxophones); brass (tuba, trombone, mellophone, baritone horn, trumpet and cornet); and various types of percussion, including snare and bass drums, which are harnessed to the musicians who march with them attached to their shoulders; and the more stationary percussion instruments -- xylophones, large bells -- whose players tend to stand in one spot during performances.

Practices are held twice a week, three hours each, at the school. In addition to the full band, there are offshoots -- a jazz band, a small brass ensemble, and other smaller groups that play at special events and at community centers and parties.

What Mr. Savanella calls a "good number of kids" go on to schools with music programs, or schools that are almost entirely devoted to music, such as the Berklee College of Music in Boston and the Manhattan School of Music. "They take their music very seriously here," he said.

AT Port Chester High School, band is not an extracurricular activity. It is an elective course, for which a pupil gets full credit. The band meets every day, 8 to 8:45 a.m., first period

of school. During competition season (September through November) there are competitions throughout the tristate area every weekend, sometimes as many as four in a two-day period. As Mr. Savanella writes in one of his many fund-raising letters: "This is not a pep band or a halftime band. On this level, it is a performance of an entire unit -- musicians and color guard -- interpreting the music through movement. The program is between 8 and 10 minutes and is judged on speed of execution, precision and artistic effect. All music is memorized. The color guard uses flags, sabers, rifles and other props to bring the visual component to life. All parts of the program must flow together and complement each other."

The band is partly financed by the school board, and partly by the nonprofit, all-volunteer Port Chester Band Association. Its annual budget for teachers, uniforms, transportation and some instruments (the larger ones, like tubas and trombones, are provided by the school) is approximately \$100,000, \$85,000 of which is raised by the association.

The cost for the Orange Bowl trip was \$115,000. Each student had to raise \$920 through door-to-door requests, selling ads in journals and selling crates of, appropriately enough, oranges. Association members solicited from personal acquaintances and businesses. The question was, would they make it.

The answer depended on whom and when you asked. In February, when the band sent tapes to the Orange Bowl committee, and in March, when they got the big yes to come on down, elation carried the day. The attitude was, "We're going to make it happen" -- although, as Mr. Savanella said, "The logistics and financial responsibilities are enormous."

There was some fund-raising and practice in spring and even in summer, but the big push began around the end of August, when band camp convened. Band camp is an annual ritual, two weeks of intense daily practice to prepare for the new season. Mr. Vitti introduced this year's music -- a medley of Stravinsky and Mussorgsky pieces he calls "Russian Sketches" -- and the sections -- woodwind, brass, percussion -- began familiarizing themselves with their parts. Band camp culminates with those sections coming together as a whole for the first time in the new season, spread out across the football field in strict formation, a combination of musicianship and choreography that requires excellent memory, coordination and concentration. The association newsletter warned against dehydration in the late summer heat and asked parents to bring iced drinks and cool towels -- an amusing contrast to the December issue, which requested "comfort food -- thermoses of hot chocolate and cider" and thermal underwear to protect against the long, cold practices beginning at dusk and ending in frigid darkness.

Things were coming together nicely aesthetically, but finances were another matter. Canisters in local shops were filling with coins, but otherwise response to the project was lagging. The honor of being accepted began to pale when the band thought it might have to turn down the invitation. "It got pretty discouraging," one youngster said. "Don't say my name or anything, but I started getting really kind of annoyed and upset that we weren't getting more money." Acceptance by the Orange Bowl committee was being heavily undercut by a sense of irony and bitterness: what a shame to be so near yet so far; to be good enough to play at the Bowl but not solvent enough to get there.

In October, after reviewing one particularly downbeat week, Mr. Savanella confided, "I was ready to walk in front of a bus." And then, the turnaround, something out of a 1940's Hollywood movie. The Journal News, the local Gannett newspaper, ran an editorial urging residents of other communities to help make up the \$25,000 still needed to avert the trip's cancellation.

It worked. Maybe it was the injunction to "dust off your halo," or the request to please "welcome a chance to help a group of hardworking young people reap the reward they have earned." Whatever, money began pouring in. Within weeks, it was a fait accompli that the band was going -- and not just by bus as originally planned, but by plane.

The program, replete with rousing upbeat and slow, melodious passages, was perfected. The uniforms were cleaned and ready: dress blue with red sashes, white gloves, black patent-leather shoes, and helmets with "pickelhauben mit spitzen" -- literally translated as pickle stabbers with spikes, structures that stick up from the helmets. The sound and look that Mr. Vitti calls "collegian and traditional" were polished.

Now the nuts and bolts of overseeing 115 teenagers on a big air and bus trip are all that is left. Chaperone meetings are being held to review protocol. Among the advice: search the young people's bags for any contraband cans of beer or flasks of liquor well beforehand, because airport officials will do it anyway. Make sure that everyone knows that curfews will be imposed -- midnight on New Year's Eve, for example -- and that free time will be limited and meals and beach parties will be attended en masse. Team up people who know and like each other for four-in-a-room sleeping arrangements.

So far, everyone reports, all is going better than well. For many of the students this is the trip of a lifetime. For their parents, it is a source of great pride.

Sandra Rodrigues, a junior alto saxophone player and a section leader, said, "Band is so cool and this Orange Bowl trip is the absolute coolest thing -- it gets the adrenaline flowing like nothing else."

Her father, Mario Rodrigues, a driver of a newspaper delivery truck, beamed and added, "I played flute in Bolivar High School in Ambato, Ecuador. But it was a much smaller thing than things are here. When I came to America with my wife and children I never imagined the size, the effort, how wonderful and grand it would all be. I am very, very proud."

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