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A Band Night for the ages

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A Port Chester tradition turns 65

By Alissa Figueroa

When Archie Jacobs planned the first ever Port Chester Band Night back in 1945, he couldn't have envisioned that it would become a 65-year tradition. Back then, it was a way to showcase the music department he helped build to the community he loved dearly.

But on Wednesday night, when hundreds of band alums gathered on the lawn in front of Port Chester High School, the annual tradition took on a new dimension: it became a reunion, uniting not only former band mates who hadn't seen each other in decades, but also generations of players, who stood together and played (surprisingly well) together for the entire Port Chester School District community.

"My father would have gloried in this," said Harris Jacobs, '69, Archie's son, as he wandered through the crowds of alums donning matching Port Chester band t-shirts and tags with their names and years.

"This was him," said Jacobs. "Music was his life; Port Chester was his life."

In fact, for many of the 300 or so band alums that came back to their old stomping grounds, music remained an integral part of life after high school.

Nino Pallotti, PCHS Class of 1942, participated in his first Band Night this week—he predates the event. His days playing saxophone in the band not only shaped his life, they helped preserve it.

"Music saved my life," he declared on Wednesday.

That's because had he not been permitted to play the sax in the army band when he was drafted in 1943, he would have become an infantryman, like his cousin—who left Port Chester bound for Fort Dix on the same train as Pallotti but was shot dead on an Italian battleground soon thereafter.

Music still keeps Pallotti (who was band director at Corpus Christi for 27 years) active—he's playing a "three piece job" for the Westchester Dinner Dance



John Bova, from the Port Chester High School Class of 1946, plays his trumpet as part of the alumni band created for the Port Chester School District's 65th Annual Band Night on Wednesday, June 10.
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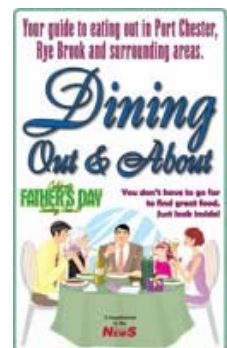
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Club later this weekend.

Down on the field after rehearsal a group of players who graduated in the early 1970s reminisced about the good old days.

"Band was the most important thing, the best thing in high school," said Mark Jordan, clarinetist and band vice president for the Class of 1971.

"We worked so hard, coming out here to practice at 7 a.m. ... We had something really special."

Steve Cooper, '73, became a music major in large part because of his band director.

"Ken Force was the biggest influence in the early part of my life," said Cooper.

Force, or "Fotch" as he was called by many (though no one seems to recall why, exactly) touched hundreds of lives during his time as director, from 1966 to 1971. In his last year, the band traveled to California for the Rose Bowl. They also played in Madison Square Garden with the Ringling Brothers Circus and traveled to Washington, D.C. for the Cherry Blossom Parade under his direction.

"I love it here," said Force, who led the alumni band in several numbers on Wednesday. "I feel at home."

After leaving Port Chester, Force went on to play trumpet with the Merchant Marines. He didn't want to go to another school district; "nothing compares to Port Chester," he said.

Force was in his element on Wednesday, joking and laughing in a thunderous voice with colleagues and former students who, almost 40 years after graduating, still seemed somewhat in awe of him.

During the alumni band rehearsal earlier in the afternoon, he bellowed out commands to the motley group gathered below in between jokes.

"Quiet! Feet together, eyes up!" he boomed.

But he also took some time to look around and marvel at the spectacle.

"This stuff really grows in you," said Force.

"These people, many of them have jobs totally unrelated to music, and they still play—and they're very competent—I find that remarkable."

Bob Tunick, from the Class of 1946, played the same saxophone on Wednesday night that he learned on at Park Avenue School during the Great Depression.

He played that same sax for years after leaving Port Chester High School in the army band, but put it down after having children, because as infants the sound of him practicing made them cry.

"It's very exciting to be back," said Tunick, who'd practiced for two months for the big night.

"I held my own out there," he insisted.

Tunick's classmate from the Class of '46, John Bova, did as well. He became a professional trumpet player immediately after graduating from PCHS and has played with the New York Philharmonic along with an impressive list of famous groups.

"All I wanted to do when I was at Port Chester was play music," he said. "It's a wonder I graduated at all."

Putting it all together

Though Archie Jacobs may have started Band Night all those years ago, it was the district's current music director, Ken Kraut, who organized the 65th anniversary celebration with the help of some very modern technology.

He started a Facebook group to get the idea out there. When he realized how many people were interested, he and his staff hunted down 1,000 alumni addresses, sent out letters, and got busy planning.

Kraut posted the sheet music for the event on the PCHS Band Web site and made instruments available to

those who didn't have their own (though most still had their instruments from high school).

On the big day alums were gathered practicing in small sections even before he got there, three hours prior to show time, said Kraut.

"Every part of it went so well," he said on Thursday. "It was such a great effort by so many people."

The actual performance—during which everyone in the stands stood, clapped and cheered, felt "like looking into the bleachers at Yankee Stadium," said Kraut.

Many alums he spoke with said they'd had a better time on Wednesday than at their own class reunions.

"These are the people you spent a lot of time with," he explained. "Everyone's there that you want to see; everyone's there for the same purpose—music."

This is part of the [June 12, 2009](#) online edition of Port Chester Westmore News.

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