

SCHOOLS

Q&A with Robert Vitti, Port Chester High School Band Director

High school music maven tells how tunes help trigger confidence, communication, and talent in young people.

By **Christine Loughran** January 8, 2011

Port Chester High School achieved a measure of musical stardom this October when they took home the first place trophy at Connecticut's New England Marching Band Championships in October 2010.

Port Chester has a large population of ESL (English as Second Language) students, and Robert Vitti, the school district band director, says music knows no language barrier, only half-beats and quarter notes.

Digging through the archives of a career spanning 30-plus years, Vitti has experienced many trials and tribulations. The veteran teacher recently talked to Patch about everything: coaching his marching band, "Pride of Port Chester" at out-of-state competitions; continually encouraging kids to perform their best year after year; and how the arts can even help the quietest kid in the classroom become the loudest in the music room.



PHOTOS (3)



In short, directing high schoolers is no easy task. But with a regimented practice routine and a positive outlook, one teacher is capable of making a difference in not one but 138 lives.

What programs are you involved in?

I direct the High School Concert Band, Wind Ensemble, Jazz Band, Marching Band, Indoor Percussion and Indoor WinterGuard.

Music has been a source of entertainment since the dawn of time. How do you feel Port Chester continues to make it fun for kids to engage?

Self-motivation is a huge part of it. With the marching band, we compete all over the East Coast, including the Yamaha Cup during the fall of 2010 at the Meadowlands Stadium. Out of eight or nine bands from different parts of the county, we received class 5, which is a win. People in other states relate the Port Chester area to its music program here because of that, which itself is a motivational factor for kids.

We also rehearse seven days a week, with two or three nightly rehearsals and traveling on the weekends. We've become like a family since we're spending so much time together. [The staff] constantly raises the standards to make them better musicians.

How does that work on a day-to-day basis?

We work hard in having a cohesive curriculum through the levels to make it. If I'm dealt a certain hand [with a group of kids] I try to make the best of it. If talent in areas needs to be improved, I try my best to get them up to snuff.

For example, when we went to the Yamaha Cup last year, I talked a lot about the performance beforehand saying things like, "When you walk into that arena..." Going through that tunnel [entering the show before the performance] is a big charge for kids.

Port Chester is a diverse school community with more than just English spoken throughout the day. How does this crossover relate to you as a music teacher?

I teach kids of all walks of life, but music is a universal language. There are only seven notes out there that we play—that is the language we use *together*. I always tell the kids, "This is what we speak, so we may as well master it."

Since there is a large Spanish population, some parents don't speak English. In some other countries, music education is not as strong as it is here in the U.S., so our band program at PCHS is overwhelming. When I have parent meetings, sometimes we do it in their native language to get them more involved.

What about financially?

The one thing we don't have is kids studying their music privately. In some wealthier schools, they may have the instruction in school and then a \$50 private lesson elsewhere. In nearby places like Rye or Greenwich, Conn., that is the case, but for us, what the staff teaches them is what they walk away with. What we give the students is what our curriculum has built to offer.

How many kids are involved in the instrumental side of the music department? Do they remain actively involved after that?

Out of 138 kids in my marching band, I may lose one or two but gain another five in return. Kids have other things going on too; we may also have 50 out of that number that are involved in sports or cheerleading, but the commitment is very large.

Forty-five percent of those 120 people in the high school concert band—around 50 kids—are state-rated by the [New York State Musical Association](#) each year, which is an indication they're serious about it.

How do you feel that music helps kids have an alternative to things like peer pressure? What about a shy kid who finds his self-expression through music?

There are all different types of kids. You may have a quiet one who may not hang out with a loud group, but through his instrument, he tears the house down. Being in the band makes those kids feel part of a team. Once they feel they conquered their fears, a lot of their levels of self-esteem improved.

There is a lot of distraction with cell-phone texting, computer games, etc. for the kids of today. Is the band program kind of like a diversion from this?

I don't allow that during rehearsals. Speaking as a teacher, the amount of that is out of control. The kids try to sneak it behind their music stands and things like that.

Are there a lot of kids who leave the program at PCHS and go on to music programs at places like NYU?

I had someone go into NYU's music program a couple years back. I usually also have between two and three that continue onto music education. Sometimes we have five or six going.

What do you want kids to get out of the music program overall?

Well, with the marching band, we rehearse seven days a week, between two and three nightly rehearsals and traveling on the weekends-- we become like a family.

Interested in a follow-up to this article?



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COMMENTS (2)



Jill

9:01pm on Sunday, January 9, 2011

Those baritone players shouldn't be holding their baritones down! :)
As a former baritone player in the PCHS band, I had to comment. :)



Nik Bonopartis

9:37pm on Sunday, January 9, 2011

Those two shots were from the tree-lighting ceremony at the waterfront last month, which was a ridiculously cold day, so I think we can forgive them for being lax. :P They were probably dreaming of hot chocolate and the warm indoors at that point.

Thanks for reading Port Chester Patch.

Cheers,

Nik