

Port Chester marching band takes third in final competition

Students thrive under Madeline Rende

By Casey Watts, Reporter

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The beginning of the school year was uncertain for the Port Chester High School Marching Band when the administration learned that band director Bob Vitti could not immediately return to school due to his health. Assistant band director and former band member Madeline Rende stepped forward to take charge and under her, with some help from Vitti, the band has flourished.

This year, the band went up one class due to their size and entered the most populated area of competition. Despite having 140 students and a large color guard to work with, under Rende the band has continuously received high scores for their performance of The Who's musical "Tommy."

During their first show at Northern Highlands Regional High School in Allendale, N.J. on Saturday, Sept. 17, the band took first place with a score of 78.3. Nearly two months later, the Pride of Port Chester had five first place victories, one second place and one fourth place under their belt.

Before going into their final competition for the year in Allentown, Pa., on Saturday, Nov. 5, the band spent three hours on that final Saturday practicing on King Street School's field. After a 2.5-hour bus ride, it was time for one final pep talk as Rende had the spur of the moment idea to call Vitti.



With saxophones held high and golden flags twirling through the air, the Port Chester High School Marching Band puts their all into one last practice on King Street School's field before their final competition of the year in Allentown, Pa. on Saturday, Nov. 5. Casey Watts|Westmore News

Port Chester High School Marching Band scores

Sept. 17 at Northern Highlands Regional High School
 Allendale, NJ
 1st Place, 78.300
 Awards for Best Music, Overall Effect, Visual

Sept. 15 at Wayne Valley High School
 Wayne Valley, NJ
 1st Place, 77.125
 Awards for Best Visual, Percussion, Music, Overall Effect, Color Guard

Oct. 1 at Montville Township High School,
 Montville, NJ
 1st Place, 85.550
 Awards for Best Visual, Percussion, Music, Overall Effect, Color Guard

Oct. 8 at Newtown High School,
 Sandy Hook, CT
 1st Place, 85.825
 Awards for Best Visual, Music, Overall Effect

Oct. 15 for the Yamaha Cup
 East Rutherford, NJ
 4th Place, 84.200
 Award for Best Percussion

Oct. 22 for the US Bands NY State Championship
 Walt Whitman HS, Huntington Station, NY
 1st Place 92.163

US Bands NY State Champions
 Awards for Best Music, Visual, Color Guard, Percussion, Overall Effect
 Cadet Award of Excellence

Oct. 29 at Ridge High School
 Basking Ridge, NJ
 2nd Place 95.200

Nov. 5 for the US Bands National Championship
 Allentown, PA
 3rd Place 93.313
 Award for Best Music

Courtesy of Madeline Rende

"He basically said what we've all been saying," Rende recalled. "The seniors took on a huge responsibility; stepping up to the plate without Mr. Vitti there to help and instruct them. His biggest thing was to just go out there and have fun."

The assistant director said Vitti also told the kids that he knows they've been told to do their best for him, but tonight they should do their best for themselves. He finished the call by telling the band that he loved them, he wished he could be there and he was proud of their accomplishments.

"It was definitely the pep talk we needed," Rende said.

Their final show had them up against seven other bands and Port Chester took home bronze.

Coming down from the high of placing third and winning the caption award for best music in their final competition, senior drum major Elizabeth Montemurro found the entire night to be bittersweet. She said once the last note of her final high school competition finished ringing, she couldn't stop the tears from falling.

"As we were finishing the last few measures of the show, a bunch of memories kept racing back, like my first competition, band camp, it all went by so quickly, not just this year but the entire experience," Montemurro said.

"It's not the last time we'll see each other, but it's the last time we'll see each other in that light," she added.

Rende was also emotional, but she shed no tears. Instead, she was left speechless from how incredibly her students performed. For her, the biggest reward wasn't the final score, instead it was seeing how proud the band members were of their own performance. Rende explained that the students would always ask the staff how they thought the performance went and she would turn the question back at them.

"If we get a good response back, that's a huge plus," she said. "For me, how they progressed throughout the season, having students say we have this problem here and self-evaluate on what they need to work on as an individual and an ensemble was incredible."

Senior trumpet soloist Nick Smith recalled that the first time he played his section in front of a larger crowd, it was nerve-racking. He has had solos before in jazz and concert band, but this was his introduction to having a solo while playing on a large field with the rest of the band marching behind him. But the nerves quickly dissipated when he realized he had the support of the entire band behind him.

Freshman baritone player Edzani Kelapile used to get tired out going through all the practices, but now it's easier for him and he enjoys it more than ever. During the Saturday practice before their final competition, the freshman said he thought the band had high expectations for themselves and they would perform to the best of their abilities. He was excited to see how they would do against the other bands and is looking forward to continuing his musical education with the marching band next year.

Rende's performance

At first it was overwhelming for the elementary school band teacher to take over for Vitti, but Rende knew she needed to maintain focus and think about everything Vitti had taught her in her four years as his student and in her years since then as his colleague, she said.

"I could never fill his shoes because he's had such a big part in this organization," Rende said. "I could just hope to be somewhere near him and make him proud and make him know this season was all about him."

Port Chester's music department chairman Ken Kraut believes Rende did very well. Everything was already in place for her when she took over, but he acknowledges that there is a difference between having things in place and implementing them.

"Madeline did a great job," he said. He also praised her for her vision on improving the band after looking over the judges' feedback after every show.

At the beginning of the season, Montemurro had hopes of her senior year working with Vitti and playing music that was more familiar to her, but she has since changed her mind. The senior only offered praise for Rende and said she did an amazing job leading them by using her past experiences learning from and working with Vitti as well as teaching music at John F. Kennedy Magnet School.

"I'm glad we had her and not someone we barely knew," Montemurro said. "She already knew how we learned, our system and what we can do. She really pushed us, but didn't push us so far, not enough to break down. She pushed us enough to shine."

"It was a hard transition, I'm not going to lie," she continued. "But having her take over was a great opportunity. She's an amazing drum major and she really helped me out. She did an amazing job. She's just a very likeable person and I'm so glad she fell into place at such short notice."

Now that the season is over, Rende returned to JFK and took a new position at King Street School teaching music. The high school jazz and concert band will work with Michael Miceli, who is the band director at King Street and Park Avenue Schools and the assistant music director at PCHS.

Rende hopes this season left an impact on the students and they remember the lessons they've learned over the last few months.

"I hope this experience always resonates in their heart because it's an activity not many people have in their school systems and it's a blessing to have a nationally recognized marching band that is supported by their community," she said.

Rende also wants them to maintain the relationships they've made and continue to stick to their passions and follow their hearts. Because if they do that, "they can do anything," she said.

The band was not without Vitti

Even though Vitti was unable to lead the marching band this year, he was not a stranger to them. The Saturday of their week seven competition at Ridge High School in Basking Ridge, N.J., the band director made an appearance.

"It was a very sentimental moment and big for him and his recovery," Kraut said. "Of course, the first thing he wanted was to see the kids."

It wasn't a surprise visit for Rende and the seniors, but none of them were prepared for how much seeing him would affect them.

"All of sudden I heard his big booming voice behind me and I started crying in that very moment," Rende said. "It was definitely one of the highlights of the season, so to speak. To see him again with the kids and to see their reactions was priceless."

Montemurro remembered looking over her shoulder while she was on the podium and seeing his car. After the run-through ended, the senior ran over to talk to Vitti, who told her that he was proud of her.

At their competition that day, the band scored three points higher than they had previously, something Kraut partially attributed to their seeing Vitti again.

"They all know he really cares about them," Kraut said.

The administration is hopeful that Vitti will be able to return to his position before the end of the school year.