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No season for the Pride, but the music never dies

Port Chester High School Marching Band lives by Honor, Commitment and Tradition code as they overcome COVID-19

By Sarah Wolpoff

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Long before she was old enough to join, Nina Soriano looked up to the Port Chester High School Marching Band in reverence.

Particularly, her heart would beat to the intense rhythm of the drumline whenever she saw them in their sharp, traditional Royal Marine style uniforms—leading the Pride of Port Chester with their tempo as they performed visually intricate, choreographed maneuvers.

“I’ve always loved the band,” Soriano said. “Even before I joined in middle school, I always wanted to be in it. I had two older sisters in the band before I was, I’d go to their competitions, watch them at Band Night, it was always so exciting. I admired them a lot.”



Port Chester High School senior Samia Juarez holds high a flag displaying a fierce eye that was used during a winter percussion show while standing 15 feet away from other students during a color guard rehearsal in the middle school parking lot on Tuesday, Oct. 13. Sarah Wolpoff | Westmore News

It seemed Soriano was going into her senior year at Port Chester High School on top of the world this fall. Not only was she ready to rejoice in her final season of leading her fellow musicians rhythmically on the drumline with her snare, but to lead motivationally as well in her role as president of the band.

But COVID-19 brought sweeping changes to everything this year, and the marching band has not been immune to that force. Normally, the Pride of Port Chester would have taken over Crawford Park for band camp in August to prepare for this season's show—one that Band Director Mike Miceli said was slated to be a uniquely intense one. However, there was no band camp, no upcoming football games to look forward to, no competitions on the horizon. The Pride of Port Chester's season has effectively been cancelled—but the music isn't dead.

While seniors mourn their lost final year and freshmen start their marching band experience on a confusing note, Soriano realized this is the time she's needed most—where she can step up as the leader she was elected to be in May.

"I do feel like being president is different now than any other year," she said. "I find it really important to make sure the band doesn't get discouraged during these crazy times. I wanted to keep them motivated. When COVID wasn't happening, we would have practices and the president would say a few words after. This year, we've been making videos to send out, stay in touch, which has been huge. I think it helps a lot because the band knows we're still there, there for them, reaching out. We didn't just vanish. We're a team."

Though the pandemic shut down school buildings in March and prompted a quick shift to remote learning, "the band never went away," Miceli said. All spring and summer, the musicians had online meetings and individual lessons with him. Some days he would send students video tutorials, on others they'd record themselves playing to send back.

While the band is doing fine in terms of music education, the spectacle encompassed by the Pride of Port Chester is missed. Miceli was upset when he had to cancel band camp, confirming what the students had been expecting for months: there would be no majestic show this year.

"I was really disappointed when Mr. Miceli announced that band camp would be cancelled. It's not the season I would have liked to have," said Adriana Sherwood, one of this year's drum majors. "It's senior year; it's the year everyone works so hard for. You always wish to have the traditional senior year that everyone else gets to experience."

Before COVID-19 shattered the season, Miceli was preparing a dramatic show themed around the book "Art of War" by Sun Tzu—continuing his ambition to challenge the band with unique, imaginative shows while maintaining Royal Marine traditions.

Sherwood described the premise as an artistic history lesson that she would have loved to craft with her peers. It would have been an interesting performance to master while enjoying the perks of senior year she had been looking forward to since she was a freshman.

"In band camp, seniors are the ones who go all out during spirit week. And they always go out to the diner together after competitions, they get their bus decorated," she described. "The senior class usually sticks together the most. They have lunch together, run the freshman warmups. Senior year you get more recognition overall. It was supposed to be a lot of fun; supposed to be kind of like the dream year."

Despite the lack of a season, Miceli has been determined to give students a sense of normalcy—finding it critical to keep them involved. And after months of meticulous planning, things are slowly getting back to that normal. While band members are eagerly, yet cautiously, starting to practice face to face again, the Port Chester High School Band Association is planning to resume their fundraising efforts that were halted in the spring.

According to Debbie Scocchera, the association co-president, they're hoping to start collecting returnable bottles and cans again in November. The annual Booster Drive will take place on social media and through the mail this year—they're not allowing students to go door to door—and fruit sales will start in the coming weeks.

Visit portchesterhighschoolband.org for updated information on fundraising efforts. Booster Drive donations can be mailed to the PCHS Marching Band at PO Box 826, Port Chester, NY 10573.

A few weeks ago, small-group evening band practices started up in the Port Chester Middle School parking lot. It originated with four students as a test run, Miceli said, with more being added as rehearsals continue to go well. Last week, he started experimenting with 16 students at a time and has eventual plans to bring in 25.

Positioned 15 feet apart, students are making music again—playing patriotic pieces like the “National Emblem March” and the “Star Spangled Banner,” and fun pop culture tunes such as “The Avengers” theme music. He hopes to add some songs by the Beatles to their repertoire soon.

At this point, there's no marching routine. But the director is brainstorming ways to get visually creative while students stand in place.

“We're taking it day by day. We'll keep adding students if things continue to go well, and if something goes wrong, we'll decrease. I think it's a good system and it goes to show we can overcome this in our own way, as long as we're being safe and looking out for each other's health,” Miceli said. “The plan right now is to just play some music, and maybe one day we can do a show with it.

“We're going to keep practicing the music and look for ways to perform, whether it's live or online. Hopefully, we can at least have some kind of performance by the end of the year,” he continued. “The band is really the heartbeat of Port Chester. It would mean a lot for people to see us in action.”

Soriano is optimistic about the year—mostly because she has to be. A lot of students are sad about the season, so she's determined to exhibit a good attitude to keep their spirits up.

To Miceli, perspectives like that are evident across the group—a phenomenon he finds remarkable during these trying times and proves that ultimately the band will rebound stronger than ever.

“The kids have been great. They've been really cooperative, enthusiastic. They're showing the true spirit of the Pride of Port Chester,” he said. “They've inspired me to define what pride means through their hard work in this pandemic.”

Honor, Commitment and Tradition: the new motto Miceli has unveiled for the marching band that speaks to how they encompass pride—they show honor and commitment to maintaining the tradition and history of music and Port Chester.

“They display these things, and it sums up who they are. When the kids do that, that’s when they’re the Pride,” he said, and later added: “This whole thing has been an opportunity for all of us to get creative, to rethink how we do everything. I keep telling them, this may be the greatest lesson they get with dealing with adversity. When things don’t go the way you expect, how will you deal with it? They will face more challenges in life, and I want this experience with the band to be what prepares them for it.”