

https://www.hngnews.com/sun_prairie_star/community/features/sound-of-sun-prairie-marching-band-celebrates-50-years/article_cb9032f8-f00d-11ec-b27d-57d248c9008c.html

Music

Sound of Sun Prairie marching band celebrates 50 years

By Jeromey Hodsdon jhodsdon@hngnews.com

Jun 21, 2022



The Sun Prairie Marching Band appeared in this 1974 parade in St. Petersburg, Fla. The band was not renamed
Contributed

The historic Sound of Sun Prairie Marching Band is celebrating its 50-year anniversary this season. The band, composed of 8-12th grade students, began its competitive reigns back in 1972 and the name, “Sound of Sun Prairie” was born in 1984.

Longtime band director Bernie Powers recalled coming back from Illinois in the summer of 1983, he was talking with other instructors about how they needed to market the band better. They talked through some names and heard Paul Hinman say “we just love the Sound of Sun Prairie” on one of his tapes, and Powers thought that was the perfect name.

Powers has been instrumental in the marching band’s success since coming to Sun Prairie in 1978. He was the director of Sound for 26 years until he retired in 2004.

Powers grew tired of being known as “second place Sun Prairie” by other schools at the time, and wanted to build a winning competitive culture. He did just that and more by creating core values of leadership, teamwork, self-discipline and acceptance among band members.

“When we started out we didn’t have a sense of unified purpose,” Powers said. “We had friendship groups here and there. It took about four or five years. We became a group that was very accepting of everyone and it was a family.”

In addition, he decided that the marching band was going to work harder than any other competitive band. That's when the well-known 9 a.m.-9 p.m. practices were born.

One day, the marching band was in Iowa practicing on a hot summer day. Some older kids said that they were being worked too hard and it wasn't fair to the younger kids. Powers pulled them together and gave them a chance to go home.

"For those of you that think this is too hard, we'll send a bus home and we'll refund you for the rest of the season," Powers told the band. "There will be no hard feelings."

He said that nobody left and they continued to work harder.

Powers had some assistance along the road to building a winning culture: He was accompanied by an outstanding staff.

"Ken Paris was the heart of Sound of Sun Prairie," Powers said. "He was an outstanding teacher and drill instructor."

Another music teacher also received praise from the longtime director. "Steve Sveum was the first drum major that I selected for the band," Powers said. "The program wouldn't have been successful without him."

Ann Sederquist marched in the band under Powers from 1976-80 before joining the staff as a color guard instructor in 1981. She served in that role for 18 years before becoming the Sound director.

In addition, she began teaching band in 1987 at five Sun Prairie elementary schools. In 1998, she moved to Prairie View to be a middle school band teacher, and she stayed there until she retired in 2019. She has been an integral part of Sound, serving a variety of roles over the years as a business manager and still helps out when needed today.

“I went from marching in the band to teaching right away because I believe so strongly in the core values of the group,” Sederquist said.

She was treated well by the rest of the staff as the young new teacher. She knew the band’s values of equality, teamwork and acceptance started with the staff.

“If you’re on staff, you have an equal opportunity to contribute,” Sederquist said. “We would consider everyone’s ideas.”

When Powers moved to Sun Prairie, he said there were more than 30 marching bands competing from Wisconsin alone. Various reasons caused many competitive bands to dwindle and drop out over the decades, but Sound of Sun Prairie continued to thrive.

“The last 10 years of my teaching, we were talking about what we were going to do when this activity dies,” he said. “When it gets below 100 people we talked about quitting. We decided it’s not how many, it’s about how we do it.”

There are many factors at play for the continued success of the band. Many dedicated people are needed for a marching band program to be competitive, but it’s another thing to be able to sustain the level that Sound has been at. It started with hard work, commitment and discipline.

“We had recap meetings going over what went well and what we needed to improve on,” Powers said. “We always had the kids rewrite what their three goals were each summer. We would write down the goals of the collection of the band.”

However, the instructors emphasized having fun because it’s hard to succeed if no one has fun doing it.

“If we aren’t making this fun for the kids and the staff, then we shouldn’t do it,” Powers said. “We would have to have some forced fun on long days.”

Even if it was just a short leisure break or a dress up day, any bit of fun lightened the mood and retained focus.

“We had scheduled fun events every day in 2019,” Sederquist said. “We had decade day, dress like a staff member day, twin day and super hero day.”

Band is an experience that takes many people to be successful. Funding for bands in the summer can be an issue. Even with dedicated students and staff, it takes community support for a successful marching band.

While Powers was the director, the band started to prioritize physical fitness and healthy eating. They ate a lot of fast food and didn't do any fitness or conditioning exercises. Powers noticed that if they were going to keep up with the best competition, they would need to boost health and stamina.

“We decided we needed better food service,” he said. “Parents started to volunteer to cook meals. Some would cook literally 1,000 meals in one season.”

One parent, Traci Ruether, volunteered throughout her son Jordan McWilliams' time in Sound in 2014-18. She volunteered with The Sun Prairie Band Boosters' Chuckwagon, which was responsible for feeding the kids and volunteers. It was a large operation that required an organized leader to plan meals, snacks and liquids.

“I remember cutting 22 pounds of strawberries for just one weekend,” Ruether said. “Also buttering 220 pieces of bread for grilled cheese.”

The food was all healthy and homemade. Every meal had a large parent-preared salad. The parents and The Chuckwagon traveled wherever the band went.

“They were long days, but honestly it was a true honor to feed those hard working kids, staff and other parent volunteers,” she said.

The band began doing drills like push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks and running. While it may sound tedious, many students were grateful for it.

“In the mornings we did normal physical fitness stuff,” McWilliams said. “In the afternoon it was marching fundamentals. It shaped my physical fitness. I wasn’t very active before. After doing Sound for four years, I am into running, biking and lifting.”

Powers recalled a former student coming back to thank him after graduating from boot camp.

“Boot camp was a breeze for me because of Sound,” the former student said.

Another parent, John Dooley, was involved in Sound and the booster club for 18 years from 1984-2002 as his three children all participated in the marching band.

“We didn’t move to Sun Prairie until ‘83,” Dooley said “Sound was an introduction to a lot of wonderful people. I think the people that were involved in Sound – the parents, the educators – you couldn’t ask for better people to have your children around.”

His son, Bret, went on to become the first captain of the Notre Dame drumline as a junior. Dooley credits Al Auby for driving his son’s success.

“Sound was able to continue to succeed because it was about the people, and how they were taught to treat one another,” Dooley said. “At the end of the day it was about how you’re treating your peers and other people.”

Every student and staff member recognizes the contributions parents like Ruether and Dooley made to make Sound as successful as it could be.

“Without parents the band would not do anything,” Sederquist said. “We have parents who repair equipment, we have parents that do graphics, we have parents that cook literally thousands of meals a season.”

It truly is a combined effort from students, staff, parents and the community to make Sound thrive as much as it has.

“We tried to dream big and then find parents that could make it happen,” Powers said. “You wouldn’t be able to have a budget and pay for the work that the parents did.”

Powers’ reason for becoming a teacher was so he could leave a lasting impact student’s lives. “Sound gave him life skills,” Ruether said. “I credit the band teachers for guiding Jordan, giving him confidence to be a leader, and understanding the value of supporting each other. A lot of his best friends are former Sound members.”

McWilliams noted that the staff have always been incredibly supportive through their leadership. He is thankful for the massive support and volunteering from the community.

“My favorite thing is the feeling that it was all worth it after months of grinding,” he said.

His most memorable moment was defeating their rivals by .1 point in the Mid-America Competing Band Directors Association Championships.

It wasn’t just the staff at the high school that played an important role in developing the Sound program. Chris Gleason was the Sound director for a short time starting in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic hit. However, he spent 18 years as a middle school band teacher at Patrick Marsh, developing students’ skills and getting them ready to join Sound.

“The way that all the music teachers are like a web and connected together, even as a middle school teacher, it was important getting them ready for Sound,” Gleason said.

He remarked how truly amazing 50 years of success is.

“It really is a long time considering the scope of how things changed in 50 years,” he said. “It takes a village to make these things happen. It takes amazing dedication from teachers. They are pouring out unbelievable amounts of time to these students.”

Matt McVeigh is the new director in 2022 and he said he has some big shoes to fill.

“You stand on the shoulders of giants,” McVeigh said. “Over the past 50 years, there has been a lot of passion, a lot of vision, and a lot of energy by so many amazing teachers. Our staff is really inspired by that tradition.”

He is surrounded by a strong staff of instructors that have many years of experience, including Ian Melrose. Melrose joined the wind staff in 2007 before becoming the Sound director in 2011. He is still with the program this summer as the business manager.

“This year is even more special than anticipated,” Melrose said. “Knowing how hard COVID has been on the music world, Sound didn’t really exist the last two years. Only 15-20 students are returning, about 50 are new and haven’t done this before.”

Melrose recognized that Performance Director Mark Davidson has been vital to keeping the program alive in recent years and is the only staff member that’s been involved every year since 2006. He helped Sound join Drum Corps International (DCI). This is the first year they will be competing in DCI’s SoundSport division. He also reiterated the impact Powers and Paris had on him personally.

“I think there’s been incredible leadership over the years,” he said. “Bernie Powers and Ken Paris are terrific role models for me to this day.”

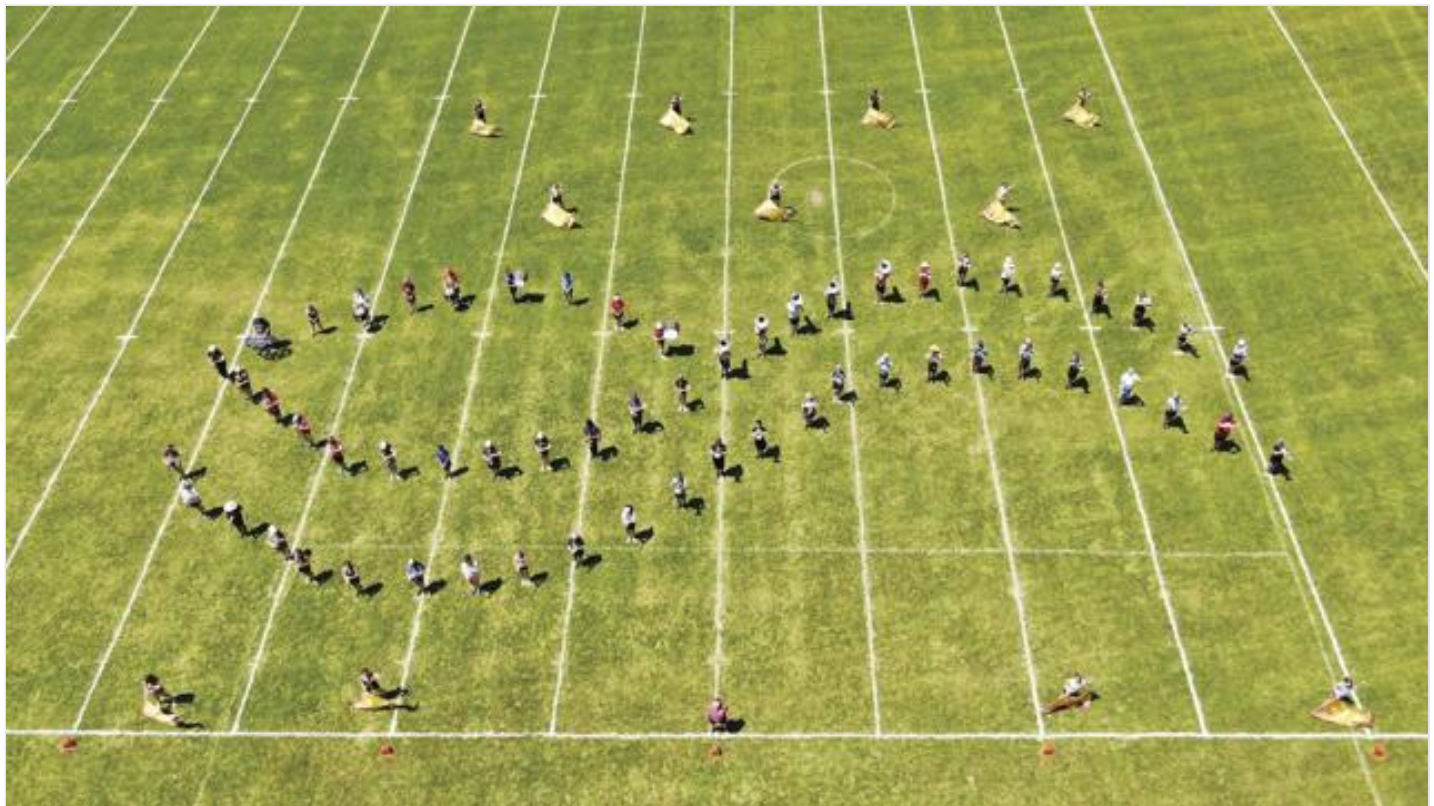
Paris was an assistant director from 1979 all the way to 2005.

“I found a lot of value in the program,” he said. “I wanted to build kids up and give them a better future. It makes me feel so warm and wonderful when people say I impacted them.”

The strong values and culture continue to this day, being passed down from generation to generation of directors and alumni.

“Sound is a family,” McVeigh said. “The positive impact that this program has had for 50 years has touched the lives of thousands of students. Our community has been made stronger through it.”

MORE INFORMATION



Sound of Sun Prairie hosts special 50th Anniversary thank you show

📷 Chris Gleason

Band Boosters getting ready to host July 31 Drums on Parade event

Sun Prairie Area School District receives national recognition for music education advocacy

Sound of Sun Prairie wins MACBCA championship

📷 Sound of Sun Prairie

[Privacy](#) - [Terms](#)

Flags of Freedom to be held Saturday

 Sound of Sun Prairie in Flags of Freedom Parade (2017)

 Echo

Local Musician attends Birch Creek Music Academy

Sun Prairie Cardinal Heights Flute Choir to play at NFA Convention in August

Sun Prairie musicians attend Birch Creek Music Academy

Jeromey Hodsdon