

JEFFERSON PARISH COPS AND CLERGY COALITION

BAND OF Excellence



Written by Jill Willie

Music is the soul of Louisiana and nowhere is that more true than in the New Orleans area. It has the power to inspire, to evoke memories, to teach and to heal. Jefferson Parish Sheriff Newell Normand is harnessing the power of music to do those things and more with the JPSO Band of Excellence.

The band, under the guidance of director Hezikiah Brinson and assistant director John Summers is in its infancy stages with approximately 30 members, but plans are to grow to 200 strong. Jefferson Parish youth between the ages of 13-19 are eligible to apply to the band.

The goals of this program are to develop a



community of support for the student, his or her family and neighborhood; to provide the student with the opportunity to earn credit in English and Math; and to expose the student to the culture, values and treasures of our community.

“The Band of Excellence is another way to reach the youth in Jefferson Parish. To give them a positive outlet to express their individuality and talent,” Normand says. “One of

the most effective ways we can fight crime is to prevent it in the first place by giving youth positive opportunities to succeed.”

With success in other youth outreach programs such as the Young Marines and the Jefferson Parish Cops and Clergy Coalition (JPCCC), Normand wanted to create a program that emphasized the area’s rich musical history. The JPSO Band of Excellence will be under the purview of the JPCCC because of its successful track record in working with youth—especially at-risk youth—in the parish.

Last summer, Brinson was chosen among eight finalists for the director position. Having spent over 25 years teaching at West



Jefferson High School, John Curtis Christian School and various K-12 schools in the Orleans Public School System, as well as at the University of New Orleans and Fort Valley State University, Brinson has unparalleled experience in building music programs from the ground up.

Band member Joshua Ward, 15, was on the verge of expulsion from West Jefferson High when the principal tapped Brinson to mentor him. He always did love the trumpet, so Brinson encouraged him to learn to play and keep at it. “Mr. Brinson influenced me to play the trumpet. The trumpet lets me express myself. I get a joyous feeling when I play,” he said. Darlene Ward, Joshua’s mom, said being a member of the Band of Excellence has been a positive experience. She touts the program’s emphasis on

responsibility and accountability. “It’s like he’s going from a boy to a man. He’s keeping busy constructively, which is good.”

With goals for the program in place, Brinson has spent the majority of his time as director for the Band of Excellence designing parameters for the band and conducting outreach into the community—identifying grant and sponsorship opportunities, working with colleges and universities and putting together an abbreviated program for the summer.

“We want to build a foundation for success through education. We are already working with colleges to have their band members act as counselors for our program. In return for college credit or community service hours, these mentors will provide guidance during college application and admissions processes as well as aid in the

transition to college life,” Brinson said.

Eventually Brinson hopes to partner with colleges throughout the Gulf South and even beyond to recruit mentors.

The first 30 members of the band made its debut at the Jefferson Parish Cops and Clergy Coalition’s event with Crimestoppers on May 7. According to retired deputy chief Richard Rodrigue, for logistical and performance reasons, the initial band members have already had some training in music. But he noted that the full band will include a cross section of youth throughout the parish, both those who want to refine their musical skills and those who have talent and are interested in performing, but have not had any formal training.

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Brinson said they will look at different variables when deciding admission into the band program. “Our goal is to provide opportunities for kids who would not normally be exposed to music due to socio-economic reasons and provide opportunities for the more experienced musicians to perfect their skills.”

Plans are for the band to perform at events throughout the city, at conventions, sporting events such as Saints, Hornets and Zephyrs games, and parades. Brinson also hopes to expand to national and even international performances that do not conflict with the academic calendar.

“The Band of Excellence is a homegrown product. Louisiana food is not the only thing that brings us international recognition, it is also our music,” he said.

In addition to more public venues, Brinson plans to have band members visit nursing homes to entertain residents. “I want them to recognize the power they have to help people and make them smile when they perform. While it is a great pleasure to perform, we want to emphasize the social responsibility we all have to make a difference in others’ lives.”

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According to Rodrigue, because the band relies on private funding and grants, the program will grow in proportion to monies raised. “We had a fundraising event on May 26th at the Whole Foods Market in Metairie which was a huge success. Whole Foods dedicated five percent of the day’s revenue to the band,” he said. “The band also provided entertainment and charmed shoppers as they paraded through the aisles. Their presence raised awareness of what we are trying to do. Shoppers responded with their own donations as well.”

Two additional businesses are aiding in the



- 1 Call 504-364-5438 and give info
- 2 A letter is sent out that must be signed and sent back
- 3 Background check performed
- 4 Candidates interviewed

funding effort. Coney Island Grill and the Daiquiri Den donated proceeds from every Thursday during June to the band.

There is a four step process to apply for the JPSO Band of Excellence. Students can call the JPCCC office at 504-364-5438 and provide their name, phone number, address, birth date and the musical instrument that they play or would like to play. A letter of notification and contract is then sent to the student’s parent or guardian. The contract must be signed by both student and parent (or guardian) and mailed back to the office. Once a background check is completed, the name will go into an evaluative pot for consideration. Candidates are then interviewed

and those with musical experience will be able to audition for first chairs. Finally, candidates are placed and notified.

Brinson notes that once admitted into the Band of Excellence, members will remain a part of the program (barring dismissal for contract violations) until they graduate from high school.

Further information can be obtained by contacting the Cops and Clergy office at 504-364-5438 or email Faith Spera at spera_fl@jpso.com. Information on other JPSO Community Programs, please contact Community Relations at 504-376-2401 or email Captain Alex Norman at norman_aw@jpso.com. ▶



A Message from the Sheriff

With two public appearances under its belt, the JPSO Band of Excellence has finally come to fruition. And while the program is still in its infancy, the goals of the program are already being achieved.

The Band of Excellence is under the purview of the Jefferson Parish Cops and Clergy Coalition, an organization that emphasizes after-school programs for young people that include tutoring, homework, academic excellence and respect for others. The goal is to encourage young men and women to strive for high school graduation and then further education at universities and community colleges. Cops and Clergy also works effectively at many other community-building efforts, including post-crisis family reconciliation, helping ex-cons re-enter society and helping children whose parents are in jail.

The slogan for the JPSO Band of Excellence is “We care about your future.” Through the program, students will not only learn or hone musical skills—they will be exposed to positive experiences, learn about pursuing higher education and be mentored by college students throughout their entire tenure with the band.

I hope that you will consider supporting the JPSO Band of Excellence either through financial commitments, donations of instruments or transportation assistance. Anything that you can do to show these exceptional young people how proud we are of them would be appreciated.

Sheriff Newell Normand ▶

