



In Tune with At-Risk Youth: Band of Excellence

Written by Jill Willie Photography provided by JPSO

On a recent rainy Wednesday afternoon, the Jefferson Parish Sheriff’s Office’s (JPSO) Training Center was abuzz with activity. It wasn’t filled with recruits, however. On that night, the building’s gym, as it has been for the last eight months, was playing host to the JPSO Cops & Clergy’s Band of Excellence’s rehearsal.

The Band of Excellence, while under the auspices of the Cops & Clergy Coalition, is the brainchild of Sheriff Newell Normand. It is another example of how the Sheriff’s Office is developing positive programs and

experiences for the area’s at-risk youth. Students from the ages of 13-19 are eligible to participate in the band.

According to director Hezekiah Brinson, most of the members belong to their schools’ bands, but it is not a requirement for the Band of Excellence. “Any student who has an interest in music and desire to learn a particular instrument is eligible. However, if someone is already a member of a school band, he or she needs to remain in that band in order to participate in ours. We are not trying to replace the school band experi-

ence. We are trying to enhance it,” he said. The band is also a marching band that participates in special events. It has already performed at a Crimestoppers event and, most recently, at the JPSO Police Academy’s graduation in December. Brinson envisions having the band play at such venues as Saints and Hornets games and the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade.

The program consists of a pretty rigorous schedule, with rehearsals three times a week. While practicing music is the main focus, it is in no way the program’s only

focus. “The Band of Excellence is designed to provide life skills. We just happen to do that here through music,” Brinson says.

Since its inception, Brinson, along with Deputy Chief Richard Rodrigue, Sergeant David Green and administrator Renee Washington, have overcome numerous logistical and financial challenges in putting this group of young men and women together.

Because the students come from schools throughout Jefferson Parish, transportation was an issue. Coupled with the fact that most of them do, in fact, participate in their own school bands, Band of Excellence practices begin after their school commitments are fulfilled. (Practice runs from 6:30-8:00 p.m.) Sergeant Green runs a bus from the schools on the Westbank of the parish while the Sheriff’s Office of Community Relations handles the Eastbank.

“The kids go straight from their school practice to us and many of them don’t even get home until 9:00,” Rodrigue said. “We could not send them home that late without

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eating dinner. Therefore, we provide dinner before each practice.”

On this evening, band members trickled into the gym foyer and stood in line for lasagna, salad and bread. As Washington served them, she chatted with each and every one, asking about their days or particular classes they may be struggling in. She has an excellent rapport with them, knowing who eats specific foods and even providing their favorite salad dressing. “I have one daughter and two grandsons, but now I have these kids too,” she joked.

Brinson infuses academics into everything he does with the band. Because many of the kids know how to play by ear, he is teaching them how to read music. This discipline is helping eye coordination which enhances reading skills. In learning notes and scales, the kids are getting a better understanding of numbers and fractions. Brinson adds that he even gets into philosophical discussions with them, having them ponder whether or not you can actually hear silence.

Students also work together on assign-



PREVIOUS PAGE: The Band of Excellence performed at the Police Academy’s Graduation in December. THIS PAGE TOP: The Band practices its drill techniques. THIS PAGE BOTTOM: Renee Washington volunteers to help with the band.

ments and tasks using the buddy system. For Alida Blunt, this technique has done more than enhance learning for her nephew, Shannon Simmons. It has helped him forge positive relationships and simply enjoy being a 13-year-old.

Alida read about the Band of Excellence in the paper and thought it would provide a positive experience for Shannon. “Shannon was definitely a child at risk because of his

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Positive Experiences Help Fight Crime

On behalf of the Sheriff's Office, I extend my congratulations to the JPSO Band of Excellence for their outstanding performance at our Police Academy Graduation. This group of exceptional young men and women, have worked tirelessly in honing their skills. I applaud their dedication and commitment.

While the Band of Excellence produces a great show, it is also producing great individuals. Targeting at risk youth from 13-19, the band is providing a positive outlet. Too often, our youth turn to drugs and violence due to lack of direction. Programs like the Band of Excellence and Young Marines are engaging our kids and giving them opportunities to succeed outside the drug culture.

For all its strides, the Band of Excellence is still in its infancy. Today, there are actually more band members than instruments. Students have to sign out instruments and take turns playing.

Because the band relies solely on private funding and grants, it can only grow in proportion to monies raised. With the financial support of the business community, we can literally give the Band of Excellence the instruments it needs to grow and succeed.

Sheriff Newell Normand



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background. His aunts and I are helping to raise him and so he's more used to being around adults than kids his own age," she said. "Because he has a brain shunt, he would have never been able to play sports. This band is now his refuge and he loves it."

Alida said Shannon has phone numbers for a few of his band mates and he is beginning to call them to talk about the band. He also spends time on the computer looking at different marching bands. "It has helped elevate his self-esteem. He's more social now."

It is not just Shannon who has responded positively to Brinson's teaching style. With varied career goals including business management, teaching and even becoming a professional football player, almost all students say they want to pursue music in college. Paul May, a junior at West Jeff, said he wants to get a business degree in college, but since learning music theory in the Band of Excellence, he is thinking about pursuing a dual degree.

Saul Amerzuca is in eighth grade at Gretna Middle School. He was admitted into the Band of Excellence a few months ago after learning about the program from his school's band director. He said he is learning more challenging songs, but that he is enjoying it. "Mr. Brinson doesn't give us a sheet of paper and tell us to read it. He tells us about the theory behind it and breaks it down so we will be able to understand it more."

As practice time nears, music begins to stream through the gym. Some kids are



tuning their instruments, some are playing Mardi Gras music and some are getting their sheet music together. Even Shannon—whose aunt had purchased a used baritone for him just hours before—was showing off the instrument to a few friends. It is a refreshing scene, to see kids of different races, ages and sexes joking and laughing with one another.

"There is a special dynamic that happens with bands," Brinson said. "They really become extensions of members' families. That goes for the students as well as instructors and administrators. Of all of the relationships that have been forged, the most impressive is with members of law enforcement. They have torn down the walls that had existed and see them now as individuals, as loving and caring people. We need our kids to work with law enforcement. Not against them."

The Band of Excellence will be hosting a four-week camp for students ages 13-19 during the summer. For more information, please contact Mr. Hezikiah Brinson at the Cops & Clergy office, 504-364-5432 or 504-364-5438. ■

ABOVE: Shannon Simmons shows off his baritone to band director Hezikiah Brinson.