

More than Halftime

The bright stadium lights pierce the indigo sky and illuminate the bustling football field. Marcus High School's boys in red jerseys chase and tackle Hebron High School's boys in blue jerseys intermittently between the shrill of a referee's whistle. The booming announcer's voice is projected throughout the facility, drowned out only by the occasional canon and air horn that shriek in tandem whenever a team scores a point. The dry, 97-degree Texas weather failed to deter the hundreds of fans that pack into the rickety bleachers with fresh popcorn, soda, and candy. Fans cheer and clap and boo and yell for hours as cheerleaders dance and twirl their pom poms and chant synchronized cheers. Underneath the ear-pounding roars of the crowd, a faint melody emerges.

Crammed in the far left corner of the home team's bleachers sits the Marcus High School Marching Band- more than 300 students wearing grey pants and white jackets with a large, grey 'M' stitched across the chest proudly. For now, the students have removed their shakos (hats) so that the plumes (tall feathers that stick out of the shakos) won't obscure anyone's view of the game.

From afar, each student's bright red water jug can be spotted sitting in their laps, along with the sparkle of newly polished brass instruments. As the band plays *Proud Mary*, the instruments bob up in down, perfectly in time with the hands of the Drum Major.

Geneva Le flicks her baton as she guides the band through *Proud Mary*. While most high school Drum Majors conduct in military style-- sharp, flat movements- Le continues the

Marcus tradition of conducting in a classical style-- fluid and round, with short flicks of the wrist indicating each beat.

Soon, the band will perform in the halftime show, as is customary with most high school football games. Le acknowledges that the halftime performance is the only aspect of marching band that her teachers and classmates see, but for the band, it's simply a warm-up for their competitions the following day.

"[Marching band] is not defined by football. Though that *is* its origin, great things go beyond its origin and that's why marching band is so great." Le says.

Every fall, thousands of marching bands across the United States participate in intense marching contests. The majority of these competitions are hosted by Bands of America, a division of the organization Music For All. BOA officials judge bands based on visual technique, musicianship, general effect of the show, and color guard (dancers who spin rifles and twirl flags during a marching band performance.) BOA hosts regional, super regional, and national competitions, the largest of which is the annual Grand Nationals Marching Competition in Indianapolis. Flower Mound, Texas' Marcus High School competes in "grand nats" every four years.

The Marcus High School Marching Band is widely regarded as one of the best bands in the nation. The band held the Texas UIL State Marching Competition Champion title for ten consecutive years from 2006 to 2016. Highly praised in the marching world for each

student's precise technique and dedication, the band is known for lyrically performing classical pieces while maintaining outstanding musicianship and style.

The band's extensive success is widely credited to the head band director Amanda Drinkwater, who took over Marcus's band program in 2006. As head director, Drinkwater's first order of business was changing the organization's name from The Marauder High School Marching Band (Marcus High School's mascot is a marauder) to The Marcus High School Marching Band. According to Drinkwater, the change made the band seem "less tacky."

Drinkwater's love for music emerged when she learned how to play trombone in her middle school band in her hometown of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Upon entering high school, Drinkwater was shocked to learn her father's job dictated that her entire family move to a small town located south of New Orleans. Fourteen-year-old Drinkwater was livid, and she refused to participate in the move with a positive attitude. After settling in, she demanded her parents un-enroll her from the new school's marching band program. As a compromise, her father ceded that if she attended the band's orientation and she still didn't like it, she could drop out.

The minute Drinkwater walked through the door of the band hall for orientation, a senior tuba player walked up and happily introduced her to the entire low brass section. This simple kind act was all it took to keep Drinkwater interested in continuing band at her new

school. Although she can't recall the tuba player's name, Drinkwater wishes she could remember so she could reach out to thank him for changing her life.

Throughout high school, Drinkwater developed a love for marching band. Although her 96-member band lost "literally every competition," her band director continued to drive them to BOA competitions and expose them to the marching band culture.

"Being exposed to this activity-- this is why I'm a music educator-- because my band director decided we were worthy of transport to this event [BOA Grand Nationals]... So it is about the student experience, and my own experience is that that opportunity was created to me by my high school band director, and I highly recommend it to everyone."

In her 12 years with Marcus High School, Drinkwater has implemented a three-a-day summer rehearsal schedule, various teaching methods, and a student leadership system consisting of section leaders, squad leaders, uniform managers, and more. Drinkwater recalls a day seven years ago when a student asked her what he should do while she worked with another section on a piece of music. Should he just sit there bored, holding his instrument with nothing to do? According to the tale, Drinkwater jokingly replied "Contemplate greatness." Now, the band uses this statement as a sort of motto, with the phrase engraved on the inside brim of every student's shako.

According to *The New York Times* article [Music and Success](#), students who participate in band or orchestra in middle school have elevated IQ's, test scores, and communication

skills. Furthermore, the University of Kansas conducted a study in which they determined students who played instruments scored on average 20% higher in English and 22% higher in math on standardized tests.

Le acknowledges that the rigorous rehearsal schedule of marching season pushes students to develop time management skills, which leads them to excel academically. The Marcus Band has a great support system of older students who help their younger friends with homework between rehearsals, on bus rides to games and competitions, and during lunch. Furthermore, marching season calls for demanding physical exertion, thus causing students to lead fairly healthy lifestyles during these months.

Despite the evidence proving the benefits of music education, budgets for the arts have continued to fall for public schools across the nation. *The New York Times* further reports that two thirds of New York public elementary schools lack proper music programs. Experts predict these numbers will continue to fall in light of the fact that the Trump administration recently called to remove various organizations supporting the arts from the national budget such as the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for Humanities, and the Corporation for National and Community Service.

While thousands of public high schools across the nation continue to lose funds, Marcus High School is certainly an outlier.

The band program receives more annual funding than the football team.

The Marcus Band's sizeable budget is the result of their past success, and the attention and respect this brings to the Lewisville Independent School District. In the past seven years, the school district has significantly expanded the Marcus band's assets.

- 2011: New Band Hall (Marcus now has two band halls, one for percussion and color guard, and one for wind instruments. The "Silver Hall" has an upstairs full of practice rooms.)
- 2013: Fully renovated and expanded practice lot
- 2014: Brand new uniforms for the entire band
- 2016: Updated equipment for the front ensemble: speakers, soundboards, microphones, etc.

Only the best for the Marcus Band.

While much of the money comes from district funds, a great portion is also raised through fundraising. In order to fund the band's trip to Grand Nationals in the fall of 2017, the students sold poinsettias and wrapping paper the holiday season prior.

It was during that 2017 holiday season when Amanda Drinkwater received a call from the school district's superintendent offering her the position of LISD Fine Arts Director. After much contemplation, she decided it was time to end her 30 year teaching career and move on to new endeavors. She accepted the position, and announced to the students that she

would not be returning to Marcus for the 2018 season. As her last marching season as a band director, Drinkwater wants the kids to experience the same thrill she experienced as a young band kid going to Grand Nats.

After spending two days straight on the road traveling to Indianapolis (fourteen charter buses and three semi-trucks were needed) the band arrives. Less than a day after entering the city, the band is fully dressed in uniform, entering the warm up room with freshly polished horns. (In the world of marching band, the term “horn” can be interpreted in one of two ways: It can either be used as a shorter name for an actual French horn, or as a way to refer to any wind instrument in the band. Ex: “Everyone go pick up your horns.”)

The band warms up indoors in a room on the third floor of Lucas Oil Stadium, the same facility where the Indianapolis Colts football team plays. Each section splits off to rehearse with different techs (professional instructors) and Drum Majors. The room is barely large enough to hold the band, and every sound reverberates off the walls. The sharp, rapid rolls of the snare drums pierce the air like bullets as the flutes and piccolos screech above the low rumble of the sousaphones. The techs and instructors scream their feedback, trying to be heard over all of the noise. Color guard members chant the numbers of their routines as they twirl their batons and rifles.

Geneva Le claps her hands to serve as a metronome as she counts off sequences for the flute section. Watching the precise movements and beautiful sounds emanating from the

instruments, Le is amazed at how far the section has come since August camp just three months earlier.

The entire month of August, the Marcus band had rehearsed from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. During the morning and evening blocks, everyone was outside practicing drill (the shapes the band makes in the show), while the afternoons were spent indoors with each individual section in a different classroom. While the concept of three-a-day rehearsals during the summer is not unique to the Marcus Band, the program started their rehearsals in mid-July, while most band programs start the second week of August. Drinkwater chose to start her band early in order to get in as much practice time as possible before the “eight hour rule” kicked in once school started the last week of August. According to the UIL policy, marching bands cannot practice more than eight hours a week during the school year, which left the Marcus Band to rehearse two hours a day after school Monday through Thursday. (They performed at football games on Friday so they still got some practice time in.) With so little time to meet during the school year, Drinkwater wanted to have as much time to rehearse show material as possible, which is part of the reason the band experienced so much success later on. The long days of summer sectionals truly allowed the sections to grow together and form friendships.

Throughout the marching season, “section pride” is highly encouraged by the directors. Each section is required to create a t-shirt to wear every Monday during rehearsal. This year, the clarinet section shirt featured a mouse holding a clarinet with a word bubble reading, “Don’t squeak!” (Clarinet humor.)

Often, the deep bonds and relationships among the band members extend beyond the boundaries of band and turn into meaningful friendships. Le believes the trust and love amongst the members is present during a performance- a factor which elevates each marcher's confidence, passion, and motivation.

“You can take any random group of students and they will generally on average have the same amount of potential, but the amount of bonding they do within the community and within each other- that's what makes a great product. There's not some magic thing that makes people good musicians and good marchers. We have this community of support that makes our organization unique from other organizations.”

Le thinks about the early summer band days when the kids were learning how to simply stand correctly, and she looks around the Grand Nats warm up room in awe of the immense progress the band has made in such short a time. A moderator walks in with a sign announcing there are five minutes remaining in the band's warm up before the performance. The band excelled in the preliminary competition, and they are one of twelve finalists remaining out of the sixty bands that competed earlier.

Drinkwater calls the band together over a microphone, and the kids huddle closely in a circle. The enormity of their circumstances dawns upon them, as everyone in the room realizes it is the last time they will perform this year. For the seniors, this may be the last

time they ever march a show. Rather than spend the last few minutes rehearsing, Drinkwater gives some final words of encouragement.

“You are leading tonight. There are twelve of the country’s best- of which you are one- performing in this beautiful venue. You should be so filled with joy and confidence and happiness and just a sense of fulfillment and value and purpose of what it is you do with your music together.”

The band files out of the warm up room, and twenty minutes later they are in their starting position. An announcer’s voice booms throughout the enclosed stadium. “Joining us from Flower Mound, Texas: The Marcus High School Marching Band.”

The crowd is completely silent.

The Marcus Band’s 2017 marching show is entitled “prODDigy.” The show contains music from the famous pianist Paganini, a man who was a prodigy himself. Paganini was born with a rare genetic condition that rendered his fingers and limbs abnormally long. While mocked and tormented as a child for this deformity, Paganini’s long fingers allowed him to excel at the violin and piano from an early age.

“The program is really a narrative about that which makes us unique inside and bringing that to self-acceptance and to self love and acceptance of others,” Drinkwater said.

While the performers march and play during the show, a team of kids push around props that symbolize an aspect of Paganini and his life as a “prODDigy.” Throughout the show, the color guard dances with giant eyeballs, meant to portray the idea that “all eyes are on you when you’re a prodigy,” according to Drinkwater. At one point during the show, low brass players pick up giant neon orange hands with long fingers and use these to circle around and “trap” the Drumline. Highlighting the overall theme is a massive violin with rainbow colored strings lying in the middle of the field.

The performance ends after nine minutes and twenty-seven seconds. The final “horns down” is met with roaring cheers from the audience. Color guard director John Leonard leaps from his seat as the band exits the field, and he wildly applauds as tears gather in his eyes.

“That was great! They were great! They had a blast tonight; that’s awesome.”

The band exits through a cramped tunnel, and emerges into the bright, cool November sunshine. Senior trumpet player Jacey Rosengren is sweaty, red-faced, and panting from exerting herself during the performance, but she can’t help but smile knowing she just gave her last performance as a member of the Marcus High School Marching Band.

“I gave everything that I had and left it on the field. We worked so hard this season and it just feels so good to feel everyone else be empty as well. It’s been hard, but it’s so worth it. I think marching band, one of the best parts is you learn to be competitive in a healthy way

and you learn what it's like to be dedicated and to work hard. And that is the purpose of this. It's not about the scores. It's about the dedication."

Out of all of the finalists, Marcus placed fourth- the highest the school has ever placed at Grand Nationals. The students returned to Texas elated by their success and eager to find out the theme of next year's show.

"Marching band never really ends because the behaviors we have, the expectations we have, the intensity of rehearsals, the expectations for not only our musicianship but the respect for each other, the leadership aspect- [those things] continue year round without the border or structure of a football season," Le said.

After she graduates, Le plans to attend Texas Tech in order to pursue a degree in music education. She hopes to one day instill the passion, drive, and love for music in students that she developed in her time in the Marcus Band. With more teenagers going on to pursue music after high school, Le dreams public schools across the nation will pay serious attention to the arts, and give music programs the funds they deserve.

"Marching band is the fruition of hours upon hours upon hours of work-- in the summer when most kids don't want to do anything, it's a lot of extra commitments. It's not what most kids in high school end up doing. These are band kids who are choosing to invest their time in something to better themselves and better an organization that's 300 people bigger than themselves. The sense that you're getting that group of people to get together in their

free time to do something productive and produce something so beautiful is so much more than a twelve minute half time show. It's not even just our contests: it's the three a day rehearsals in the summer, it's the two hour rehearsals after school, it's everything we do to infuse culture, and it never *ever* stops."

