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Bringing the Spirit

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Bringing the

From the trill of a piccolo to the booming bass drum, marching bands are galvanizing communities and rekindling pride among students and alumni.

On an overcast fall Friday night, 26 students gather on the Maxwell Field sideline. They begin their three-hour rehearsal with a light jog followed by stretching.

“What should we listen to?” Seth Wollam asks the group.

Karlee Bird '22 shouts, “Rosanna by Toto!”

“Ok, it’s another ’80s night,” declares Wollam, cranking up the song as the group makes its way around the track.

Wollam, who came to Linfield in 2018 from Pennsylvania’s Lock Haven University, is Linfield’s first marching band director since before World War II. In its second year, Linfield’s is the only marching band in the Northwest Conference, and among only a handful at NCAA Division III schools nationwide.

On this evening, Wollam is concerned primarily with the thousands of fans who will soon pack the stadium for the homecoming football game. The band has work to do.

“Ok, everybody! Consistent movement until the song is over,” says Wollam as he prepares for a long evening of rehearsal.

At big high schools and universities, marching band is a deep-rooted part of the game-day experience.

“The marching band is one of the most visible caretakers of collegiate traditions,” says Matt Smith, associ-

ate director of bands at the University of Kansas, who has led the Marching Jayhawks since 2011. He acknowledges that when the band plays the fight song, it rekindles a sense of pride and belonging for alumni. But, Smith concedes, marching bands tend to be associated with large universities and massive football stadiums.

Linfield wasn’t willing to accept that stereotype. Students and prospec-

would pay for itself relatively quickly.

“To do this right, we needed a plan, and we had to hire someone who knew what they’re doing,” recalls Hopp.

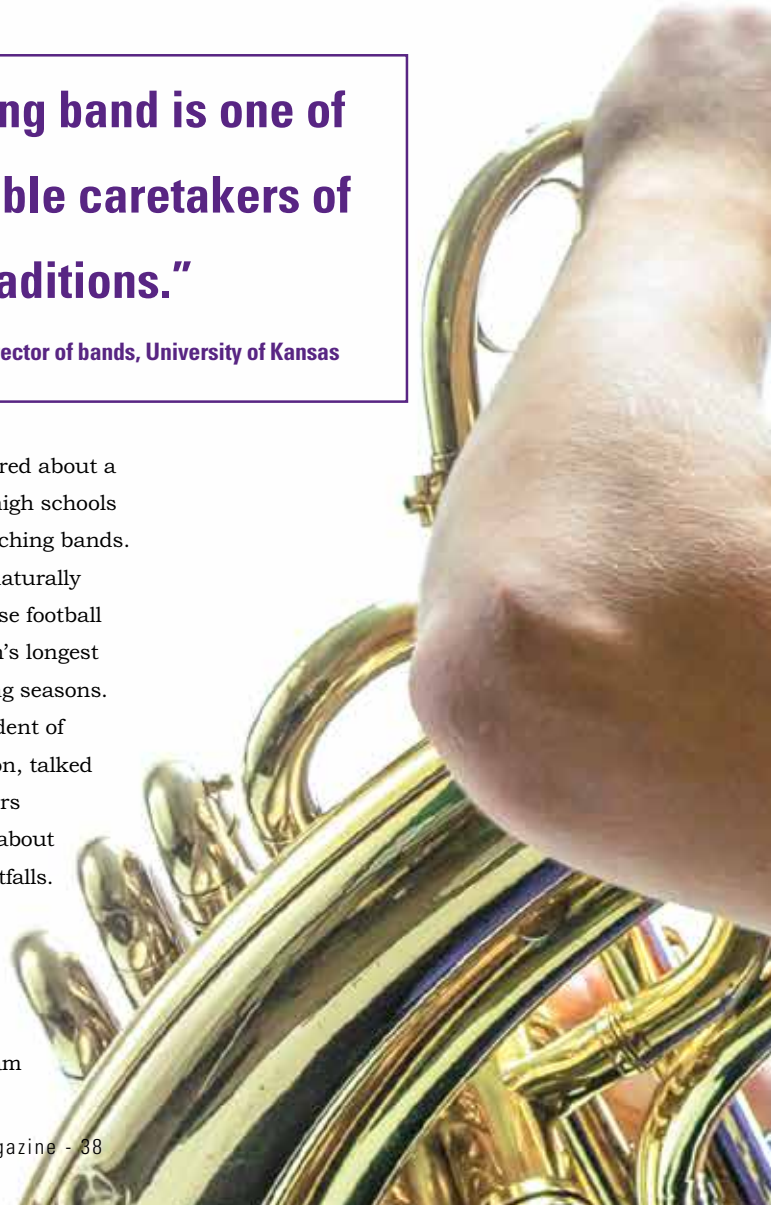
Enter Wollam, who became Linfield’s first marching band director since Clifford Elliott led the band beginning in 1933. Wollam hit the ground running in the spring of 2018 with two goals: make as many connections as possible and develop a performance group.

“The marching band is one of the most visible caretakers of collegiate traditions.”

– Matt Smith, associate director of bands, University of Kansas

tive students regularly inquired about a marching band, and many high schools in the region have large marching bands. The idea also seemed to fit naturally at a school with a powerhouse football program, home to the nation’s longest streak of consecutive winning seasons.

Susan Hopp, vice president of student affairs and admission, talked with university administrators around the country to learn about the potential impact – and pitfalls. Ultimately, she developed a four-year plan that included projections for 20 new marching band recruits per year. At that rate, the program



spirit

A close-up, low-angle photograph of a man with a full, reddish-brown beard and sunglasses, wearing a blue t-shirt. He is playing a large, shiny brass instrument, likely a tuba or euphonium. The background is bright and slightly blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting. The overall mood is energetic and focused.

He chose popular songs that students and crowds recognized, such as Bruno Mars' Uptown Funk, and incorporated movements into their routines based on the choreography from the music video.

Now in year two, word is spreading about the Linfield program. In October, Linfield hosted the Sherwood Show, a marching band competition organized by Sherwood High School Band director Brant Stai. The competition brought 13 high schools and nearly



The Linfield Marching Band includes more than students and instruments. A color guard was also founded in 2018, and the Wildcat Dance team has close ties to the marching band. All three perform at home football games and at local events, including the 2019 UFO Festival Parade in McMinnville.

1,110 students from Oregon and Washington to the McMinnville campus.

“It’s so smart” to use the band to bring high school students to campus, says Stai, a University of Oregon Marching Band alumnus. Stai recalls fond high school memories of performing at Oregon’s Autzen Stadium, home of the state high school marching band championship, and recognizes the potential for students to see themselves at Linfield.

Rain Bailey ’23 grew up in McMinnville, just down the street from Linfield. While still in the Linfield Preschool, Bailey stated matter-of-factly they would attend Linfield someday. It wasn’t until many years later, though, that the addition of a marching band ultimately clinched Bailey’s decision.

“It’s like a family,” says Bailey, a music and creative writing double major who plays clarinet. Bailey participated in competitions at McMinnville High

School and enjoys the camaraderie of the marching band community.

That family feeling manifests itself in ways that go beyond music and performance. Stai says his Sherwood band members gravitate toward the band room to study, eat lunch or talk. “They look after each other,” he says.

Camaraderie appears to be alive and well during the Friday evening practice at Linfield, too. While rehearsing for the homecoming halftime show, Caitlin Fisher ’22, a section leader, encounters a problem with the movement instructions.

“Seth, you’re missing a dot,” shouts Fisher, looking up from a spot-filled paper. Each represents a performer.

“Who?” asks Wollam through a wireless microphone from the top row of the stadium bleachers. The birds’ eye view helps him spot, and correct, formation or movement errors by the students.

“P2,” replies Fisher.

“This is exactly why I shouldn’t do this by hand,” Wollam says, with a peace offering, “I’m sorry. I’ll buy you a stuffed animal.”

Everyone chuckles. A software program that helps Wollam design and distribute performance movements has yet to arrive. But the show must go on.

Setbacks don’t phase Wollam. Like a startup-company chief executive, he’s confident in his team and the future of the enterprise. The full marching band, or small ensembles, will ultimately perform in parades and at events other than football games, and will compete against other bands from around the nation.

Wollam can see it coming together already, and fans will see it, too.

After a few more rehearsals.

“I don’t have any doubt that this is going to be successful,” he says.

– Travis McGuire

