

NHS band director plays final note

Posted on 11/07/2009

NORWALK

By TOM EVANS

Hour Staff Writer

Jeff Smith will be leading the Norwalk Marching Bears into the Cavalcade of Bands for the final time today, as Smith will retire from teaching at the end of the school year.

The Cavalcade of Bands will also feature bands from Brien McMahon, Wilton, Trumbull, New Milford, Newtown and Port Chester, N.Y., High schools, among others, and is scheduled to begin at 2:45 p.m. on Sam Testa Field at Norwalk High School.

A total of 23 high school marching bands will perform at 15-minute intervals on Saturday. Awards will be presented at 9:15 p.m.

Admission is \$10 for adults, and \$5 for people 65 and older and for students in kindergarten through 12th-grade.

Today's Cavalcade "is the single most important event that we host" and "money raised goes a long way to pay the necessary expenses that a first-class band like ours incurs," according to the band's Web site, www.nhsband.com.

That Web site also has the complete schedule of performances for Saturday's program. Weather updates can also be found on the site.

For his part Smith, who is stepping away from teaching music (35 years) and leading the marching band (33 years), feels the same way about the 27th Cavalcade as he did about the first one in 1983.

"The Cavalcade of Bands is about the kids, it's not about me," Smith said. "I've always wanted marching band to be about the children, not the director. We're a competitive band, and we do our show."

Marching band season ends on Nov. 14 with the Musical Arts Conference championships at Kennedy Stadium in Bridgeport. Norwalk is one of 15 state bands in the conference that includes schools from New York and New Jersey.

The Marching Bears have been first or second in MAC Class 5 (based on enrollment) championships since the MAC with for the 2001-02 school year. Norwalk has performed at almost every major college football bowl game, and performed in over a dozen states.

"The support of the Norwalk community for the Norwalk High School band has helped us over the years," Smith said. "That community being citizens, the Common Council and the Board of Education have all been wonderful. When we were going to the Tournament of Roses Parade a few years ago, the city of Norwalk allowed us to have a parade so we could march seven miles. In turn, we tried to be good ambassadors to Norwalk."

While all the trips and accolades are important to Smith, he said his most satisfying experience with the band program came from another example of accomplishment.

"We had a special needs student, and everybody thought he couldn't handle band," Smith said. "He went on to play with us in the Tournament of Roses Parade, and got his driver's license. When a kid with special needs goes on to accomplish what no one thought he could do -- that's satisfying."

Smith plans to be a part-time lecturer and to teach second band at Western Connecticut State University, before an eventual move to New Hampshire.

"We talk about the quality of education in Norwalk, and the students from the Norwalk High School band proved we have a quality form of education," Smith said. "One fellow staff member said I'm the luckiest guy in the world to have a job that's my hobby, and I agree. It's been a wonderful 35 years, and I will miss it dearly."