

27 years of
R.P.
(Raider Pride)

Dublin-Laurens County
salutes West Laurens
Band Director
Michael Dukes

A special tribute
section of
The Courier Herald

Dukes reflects on 27 years at West Laurens, lifetime in music

By DAHLIA ALLEN
Michael Dukes almost wasn't a band director. He almost had to give up playing his saxophone. A football mishap during his sophomore year in high school even could have cost him his ability to speak.

He was the quarterback at Johnson High School in Savannah.

"I had a habit of sticking my tongue out when I threw the ball," he said. "I wanted a first down, but when I stuck my tongue out that night, I bit it off."

His stepfather ran onto the field, picked up the tongue with his handkerchief and rushed it and Dukes to the hospital where doctors reattached it. Dukes still carries the scar across his tongue.

Until that night, he had played both on the high school football team and in the band.

"When that happened, I figured then that God was telling me to play music, not football."

The next year, he tried out for drum major, because he decided that he wanted to lead to conduct.

Some 40 years later, he still makes music. For 27 of those years, he has been the director of the West Laurens High School band, leading the 240-member Raider Brigade. Dukes plans to retire when this school year ends.

Music has been part of his life as almost as long as he can remember.

His childhood goal was to march in the Effingham County High School band. Originally from Rincon, he was a 7-year-old when he moved to Savannah with his mother after his parents divorced. On weekends with his dad, he watched high school football games in Effingham County.

"I told my mom I wanted to be in the band," he said, "but she couldn't afford to buy me an instrument."

Then he and his mother went to visit his grandmother in Charleston.

"When we got there, she had a saxophone, a trombone, a trumpet and a violin laid out on the table. She asked me which one I wanted. I chose the sax because it was so pretty and shiny, and she bought it for me," he said.

Dukes began playing in his elementary school band when he was in the fifth grade.

"God blessed me with talent," he said. "My band director knew I wanted to do more, so he let me just take off with the first book and do check-offs," he said.

Dukes finished the first book in two months, the second before Christmas and the third by the end of the school year.

"Most students don't complete the third book until after the eighth



Top left: Dukes and wife Suzanne in a photo from 1994. Top center: Dukes conducts the GSU Southern Pride at Paulson Stadium as drum major in 1985. Right: Dukes conducts the Raider Brigade against a sunset at "The Shu" in 2010. Bottom center: Dukes as he appeared in 1991, the year of his hire at West Laurens. Bottom left: Dukes leads the Raider Brigade onto the field at the old Raier Stadium.

grade," he said.

Academically, he excelled as well.

"I was an A student, but I worked for it," he said. "In high school and college, I lived in my books."

By the time he got ready for college, Dukes had been leading his high school band for two years. It paid off. Dr. Jerry Michaelson recruited him for the Georgia Southern College band.

"God has blessed me. I got a full ride at Georgia Southern on a music scholarship," Dukes said.

He graduated with a Bachelor of Music in Instrumental Conducting degree.

The scholarship didn't quite cover all a college student's needs. To earn extra money, he took on part-time jobs. One such was the year he played his sax in a band with the Barnum and Bailey Circus. On weekends for a year, he traveled up and down the East Coast with the circus.

At Georgia Southern, he auditioned and again made drum major – a position he held for four years. Because of it, he met his future wife.

"Suzanne was a piano major. She joined the drumline because she wanted to meet the drum major," he

said. "She came up to me on the field and asked me out on our first date. The sparks were there immediately. We still laugh about it."

Suzanne Dukes teaches music and art at East Laurens Elementary School and is president of Art Dublin.

The Dukes came to Dublin from Soperton when Michael Dukes was hired as West Laurens High School band director. He also works with students at West Laurens middle School and Northwest and Southwest elementary schools.

They have two sons – Christopher and Andrew. Christopher will graduate from Georgia Southern University this year and Andrew from West Laurens High School. Both play trumpets in their school bands and have been featured trumpeters.

Andrew heads for Georgia Southern in the fall as a music major. He wants to be a band director, his father said.

Once, when the Dukes attended a GSU football game to see Christopher on his trumpet featured during the halftime show, they got a nostalgic surprise.

"He was standing in the exact spot where I was when Suzanne asked me out on our first date," Dukes said. "We

couldn't believe it. We were jumping up and down and yelling."

Dukes and his sons also fish and hunt together.

"I learned to hunt in Effingham County when I was growing up," Dukes said.

He doesn't keep all the meat, though.

"Suzanne and I have a ministry where we give away 10 deer a year," he said. "The boys and I can hunt for food and give back to the community. Suzanne and I have a ministry where we help four families. We usually hear about other families in need at church."

Dukes is the choir director at Dudley Baptist Church, where he started out as interim director 21 years ago. He plans to continue directing the choir and being part of the church's ministry after he retires.

He marched the West Laurens High School band onto the field in November of 2017 for his 476th football game as a band director. The musicians were among the thousands of band students he has taught.

"I went out and hugged my seniors. One was my son. I hadn't completely decided I was going to retire, but it



Photos courtesy Michael Dukes

was in the works," he said.

Dukes, who is in his fifties, described conducting a marching band as a young man's game.

"I've had shoulder reconstruction and back problems, and I've lost 52 percent of my hearing," he said, adding that the issues are common among band directors.

Dukes likely has not marched his last band onto a football field, though. He is retiring from education, but not from working with school bands. He has taken a job with a private company as an education consultant.

"I feel like I can reach kids and educators throughout Georgia. The firm limits me to 20 schools. Seventeen have already contacted me," he said.

In addition to the consulting job, Dukes has another band-related opportunity. Bowl Games of America has contacted him about conducting high school bands that will perform at halftime in the Liberty Bowl and the Sugar Bowl.

"They invite schools from all over America. There are 1,600 at the Liberty Bowl and 3,000 at the Sugar Bowl," he said. "I would lead the team putting together the halftime show and be on the field conducting them."

Dukes caught the attention of Bowl Games of America officials in 2013 when the Raider Brigade played at the Sugar Bowl.

"The lead director asked for help, so I raised my hand," he said. "He sent me to work with 500 kids."

Two months later, Dukes got a call to join the Utah-based Bowl Games organization, but wasn't ready to give up the Raider Brigade. In fact, he declined the company's offers for several years before deciding to consider it in retirement.

"When I asked them why they wanted me, they said they had observed my teaching skills and how I handled the kids," he said, "but most of all they liked what I said to the kids at the Sugar Bowl."

By the time the phone call came, Dukes had forgotten what he had said to the band members.

"They told me I said, 'I'm an educated Bubba from Georgia. Let's make some music and have some fun,'" he said.

Dukes has played in various dance bands over the years. One of his favorites was the George Joiner Orchestra, a Big Band group in Savannah.

"A lot of high school and college band directors were band members," he said. "I learned so much."

He also plans to continue playing gigs with dance bands, at weddings and in church orchestras after he retires.

Community, colleagues will remember Dukes as community servant, friend

By DAHLIA ALLEN
Michael Dukes is retiring this spring from his 27-year career as West Laurens High School band director. However, he is not retiring from his role as choir director at Dudley Baptist Church. Or from his band – 8-Track Flashback. Or from playing at weddings and in church orchestras. Or from the board of directors of the Dublin-Laurens Arts Council.

It was his community involvement in addition to directing the 240-member Raider Brigade that prompted the Saint Patrick's Festival Committee to name him Man of the Year in 2013. People who have worked beside him in his many roles call him talented, tireless, dedicated and generous.

Henry King, Mary Crowson and Camille Carruth have served on the Arts Council board with Dukes over the 15 years he has been the organization's concert chairman. All three praise Dukes' dedication to his responsibilities.

King served as president of the Dublin-Laurens Arts Council with Dukes as concert chairman.

"Mike gives his talents so freely," King said. "He has always been so willing and never questioning."

Dukes was also concert chairman when Mary Crowson was DLAC president. "He has continued to serve and never burned out. He did it all without complaining," she said.

As concert chairman, Dukes brought the equipment to Theatre Dublin for concerts, said Camille Carruth, also a long-time DLAC board member.

"He set it up the way the artists wanted it and took it down at the end of the concert, and he always did it cheerfully. Even though he has a demanding job, he always has had time to value the Arts Council," she said.

Dukes has a network of musical contacts, many of which have been important to DLAC as well, she said, adding, "I can't say enough good about him."

They praise his musical talent as well.

King, a pianist, and Car-



File Photos

Dukes, shown conducting the Atlanta Pops Orchestra (above, left) during the Dublin-Laurens Arts Council's 2017 fundraiser, Picnic with the Pops, earned a reputation for community service through involvement in the DLAC along with his church and multiple local performing groups that led to his recognition as Man of the Year in 2013 (above, right). He also organized an annual band festival as a Saint Patrick's Event (below, left), and developed lasting relationships with people throughout the community (below, right) who are proud to call him a friend.



ruth, an organist, have performed with him numerous times in the past, especially in church orchestras.

Carruth described him as an excellent saxophonist. Crowson called him a fine musician with a unique gift for motivating – especially teenagers.

"He has played at various

churches, and kids love him," Crowson said. "He is charismatic, but he doesn't come in with a sense of entitlement like some band directors do. He knows how to get other people involved."

Two years ago, when Crowson was DLAC president, Dukes arranged for an Armed Forces band to give a 50-

minute, free concert at Theatre Dublin.

"Hundreds of people came to the concert," she said. "Most people wouldn't have taken the time, much less been able to pull it off. He speaks well for the grassroots."

King, who is choir director at Jefferson Street Baptist Church and former music

minister at First United Methodist Church, said that he and Dukes share mutual respect, especially working together in church activities.

"For many, many years, I have asked him to participate in church orchestras, and he never once said no," King said. One year, they played at each other's churches in patriotic

concerts.

Stuart Stanley is a retired band director who plays the trumpet. He performs with Dukes in church orchestras, for weddings and in brass groups. He also worked with Dukes at West Laurens High School.

"He's all about kids and community," Stanley said of Dukes. "He has gone above and beyond what most of us band directors do. He's phenomenal. He's never worried about what other people think. He only cares about his kids and his community."

Stanley said that he, Dukes and retired band director Carlos Hand put together the West Laurens band program.

"I was honored to spend the last three years of my career working with Mike," he said.

When Hand gave up the DLAC concert chairmanship, Dukes was the logical one to step in, Hand said.

"He took over and did a fantastic job. He's one of the first people the musicians meet when they come in for a concert," Hand said.

Tom Turner met Dukes in the spring of 1991 when the Dublin Jazz Band gave a concert in the parking lot of what was then the Golden Corral. They were original members and in the band together for 18 years. Dukes dropped out when it became the Georgia Big Band, and relocated to Perry. A trumpeter, Turner later joined the 8-Track Flashback combo with Dukes.

Like the others, Turner called Dukes an excellent, well-trained musician.

"He's fun to play with. He really has the best temperament to play with other musicians. He makes everybody around him want to play well," Turner said.

Dukes and Turner have been friends on and off the stage, and Dukes is the same in both places, Turner said, adding that Dukes taught him to deer hunt.

Turner said he has no doubt that Dukes is one of the greatest band directors in Georgia but still remains genuine.

"Who in the world around here doesn't claim Michael Dukes as a friend?" he said.

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'Loud and Proud'

Dukes' talent, vision key building blocks that made West Laurens band program into a musical empire

By CLAY REYNOLDS

Longtime Laurens County Schools administrator and superintendent Bill Rowe remembers hiring a young Michael Dukes from neighboring Treutlen High School to lead the West Laurens band program in 1991.

It would have been hard, at that point, to envision the legacy his new director, then some three years out of college, would go on to build in his 27 years in charge of bands at the elementary, middle and high school levels of the county's west side.

"As a superintendent, you had a few good days," Rowe said, "and one of my best days was when I hired Michael Dukes."

The program, under his guidance, grew quickly into one of the most well-known and highly-respected school music departments in the state, featuring the almost world-famous marching Raider Brigade during football season and numerous concert bands, most notably the WLHS Jazz Ensemble, in the winter and spring.

The bands, introduced by Dukes before football halftime shows as "One of the many prides we have here at West Laurens," travel with strength in the hundreds of persons and decibels. Renowned throughout the midstate, they garner superior ratings and standing ovations most everywhere they go. And the program as a whole, which to date has involved students numbering in the thousands, has left its imprint not only on the school, but its many alumni as well.

How did just one man, over close to two and a half decades, build such a large and successful musical empire?

Dukes' many students and colleagues point to a number of qualities in the veteran band leader, notably his talent for music, artistic vision and hunger for continuous improvement that, combined with exceptional leadership skills and a dedicated staff, allowed him to repeatedly set the bar higher and higher in his achievements.

"He's a tireless leader. He doesn't stop, ever," said Houston County High School associate band director Rebekah Daniel, who broke in under Dukes' tutelage as both a trombone in high school and an assistant director for one year in 2013. "He's always thinking about how to better the band program. He's always on, for lack of a better way of putting it. He's the busiest one of everybody that's a part of the program, and he's always thinking ahead. He's always 10 steps



File Photos

Dukes' attention to detail with his band members in rehearsal (bottom right) enabled his vision for performances to come to life. More than 200 strong each Friday, his Raider Brigade was able to push the limits of entertainment value and crowd involvement with their pregame and halftime shows of hit music, narrated by Dukes himself (left), and regularly finished off with a memorable bang (top right).

ahead of everything going on."

Dukes' work at West Laurens took place throughout the year, but was featured most prominently on Friday nights at Raider Stadium and, later, "The Shu," where the Raider Brigade filled the arenas with music during shows he often narrated himself before, during and after games.

Roughly three hours of performance, spread between 10-15 minutes of pregame show, "rah-rah" music in the stands and a 10-minutes of halftime show, was the product of at least a month's work for the musicians and auxiliaries, with even more planning and preparation put in by Dukes and his staff over the spring and summer to perfect each detail. No aspect of fine-tuning, from the crispness of steps in the drill to the

articulation of notes in the music, escaped his attention in rehearsal.

Showtime, defined by his mantra "loud and proud," was all about blowing the crowd away with the quality and volume of the entire production. And that they did well.

Fans turned out well before kickoff so as not to miss any of the band's pregame show, which always had something new and different to offer and, quite often, a cool surprise like a helicopter landing at midfield or sky-divers parachuting into the stadium. Their magnificent renditions of favorite hymns and the national anthem often left those in the stadium, even the members of the band on the field, with chills.

"Dukes taught me that there is nothing better than working really

hard at something and then seeing it come together beautifully for an audience to enjoy," said Allie Johnston, a current WLHS junior who plays alto saxophone. "After pre-game, when the band would blow the crowd away with 'How Great Thou Art,' 'Amazing Grace,' or 'The Star Spangled Banner,' Dukes would be so pleased. You could tell he was proud of us when he'd roll his shoulders back, give us a nod and a small smile with his hand over his heart."

The halftime shows, likewise, were a can't-miss performance, if only for the range of music that always included crowd-pleasers from both the present and the good old days. Hits by Earth, Wind & Fire, the Beach Boys, Steely Dan and Chicago had a regular place on the playlist of

favorites from classic radio, regularly accompanied by tunes from TV shows and famous movies as well as Dukes' patented Southern Gospel medley.

No show was without signature flourishes like majorettes twirling fire and a regular percussion feature with members of the drumline swapping out their traditional drums for metal garbage cans.

Year after year, Dukes outdid himself putting together special shows, often bringing together the Raider Brigade with guest musicians and members of the school's chorus to honor veterans, military or public safety personnel. The annual "mass band show" brought in middle school band members and elementary school twirlers, dancers and cheerleaders to join the high schoolers, putting more than 600 performers on the field at once.

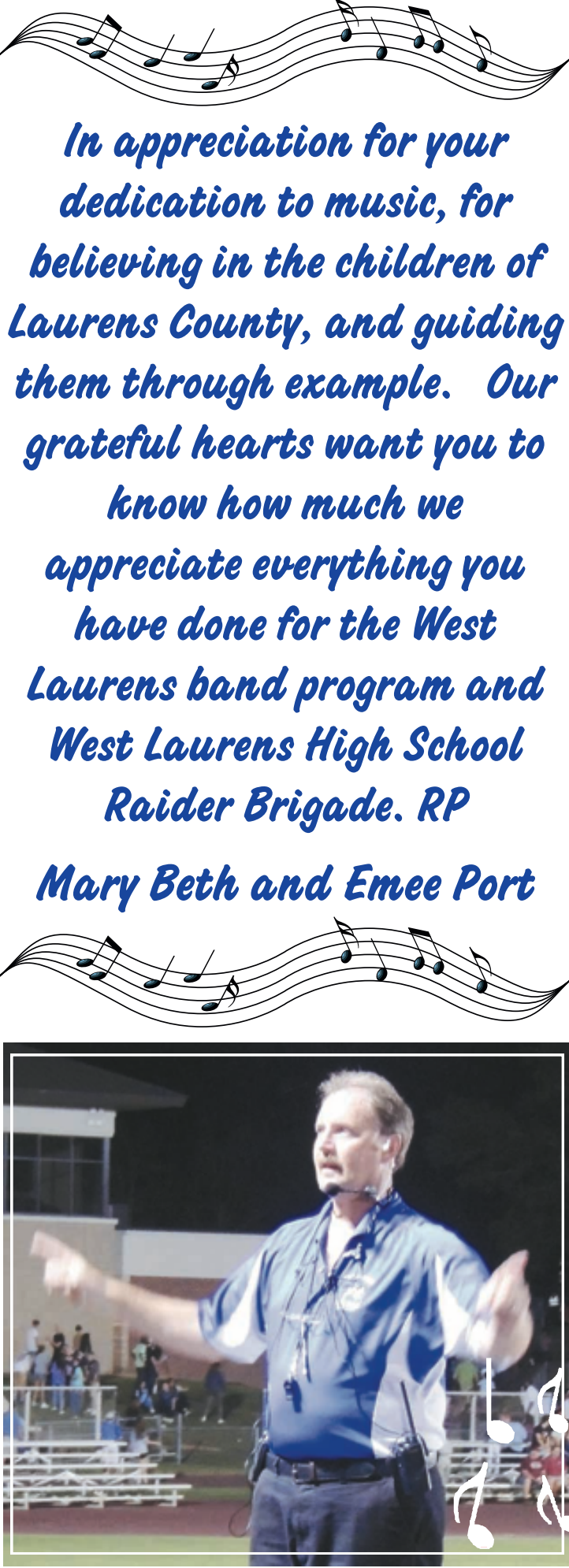
"Michael Dukes was never satisfied," said Laurens County Schools Athletic Director Jeff Clayton. "Every year he looked to do something different, make things bigger and better with more involvement from the fans and the student body. He just had an endless pursuit of trying to get better."

Notable highlights from over the years included flying in an Elvis impersonator for the mass band show in 2007, regular appearances by the Georgia State Patrol Honor Guard to present the colors leading up to the national anthem and a fireworks display accompanying the massive patriotic halftime shows almost each year since 2010.

"My favorite Dukes memory would have to be seeing the look on his face when they set the fireworks off during the wrong song at my 10th grade patriotic show," said current WLHS junior Hunter Horne, who plays trumpet. "Even though a major error occurred, Mr. Dukes was able to compose himself and keep the band going. He was able to make the show phenomenal even though the error occurred."

Dukes' creativity and stagecraft never ended with football season, as the bands began their transition to concert-style music in November. Dukes, who conducted the school's Wind Ensemble and (up until this year) Jazz Band throughout the winter and spring, put his stamp on an equally-artistic and entertaining brand of music, starting with a Christmas concert in December, moving on to a slate of higher-end material for presentation at a local band festival in March before concluding

See EMPIRE page 4



Empire

Continued from page 3

the year with a more light-hearted program at the annual spring concert.

"I think what made Dukes into such a prominent figure of the community is his flair and his dedication to the craft," said Mackenzie Manley, a current WLHS senior who plays trumpet. "When he chose to dedicate his life to music education, it produced something special you don't see quite often, especially not in a high school band program."

Much of the wow factor connected to the West Laurens band comes from its size, which during many football seasons – counting the band and auxiliary groups together – accounted for close to a quarter of the school's student body. With band members divided into individual ensembles during concert season, its overall size might be easy to miss for those not regularly on-campus. But that was im-

possible for anyone to miss on Friday nights in the fall when they were all together, traveling in five or more busloads of students with an 18-wheeler full of equipment.

"He developed one of the best bands in the entire state," said former West Laurens head football coach and athletic director John Pate. "Goodness gracious, you wouldn't consider a West Laurens band from a small environment, small county, small town being that caliber, but he was able to do it in terms of the sheer number of people. He was able to get them motivated, with the showmanship and the quality of the music. He did a great job. It was fun working with him during my tenure there... He was a classy guy and a true professional."

At the time Dukes first arrived, the West Laurens band program – at the middle and high school level – was in a good place thanks to the work of his predecessors, notably

Carlos Hand, who served as director of bands at West Laurens between 1982 and 1986 and, after a brief stint at two other local schools, would go on to serve the program as an official and unofficial associate director under Dukes until the present day.

West Laurens despite a great musical heritage entering the 1980s, had yet to develop a strong band program. Hand, elevating combined participation in the middle and high school bands from 31 to over 100, built a solid foundation that Dukes was able to build on.

"He just rose to another level with those kids," Hand said.

The size and strength of Dukes' middle and high school programs, down the road, traced back to a decision to start students in band early on, which paid off.

"One of the main things he implemented was teaching music in the fifth grade," said WLHS Principal Clifford Gar-

nto. "So he's able to attract those kids in and hook them early."

He added that so many of those students stay in band throughout middle and high school because of the hands-on involvement of Dukes, and his co-directors, at every level of the band from fifth grade at both Northwest and Southwest Laurens Elementary through their time at West Laurens Middle and High Schools, allowing them to interact with each of nearly 700 students on a daily basis.

"Our program was pretty good when Dukes got here, but not the same level that it is now," Garnto said. "He's been blessed to have some very committed parents, and committed students."

A good bit of the program's success under Dukes also owes to the many associate band directors he's worked with over the years, including Hand, Daniel, Stuart Stanley, John Richard, Jaimee Blanchett,

James Geiger, Richard Horne and Erica Cliett, among many others.

"It is definitely a community thing," Hand said. "I don't care how good the man with the stick in his hand is, if he doesn't have somebody backing him up that's pretty good."

The band's self-reinforcing pattern of excellence also has roots in the training Dukes instills in the students themselves, who function as an extension of the band staff in their roles as officers.

"Probably the biggest thing that he has created is a culture of leadership within the band," Garnto said. "You're talking about assembling 300 students, and we've got three directors and a couple of auxiliary people who help us throughout the year. But for them, most of the weight of it lands on those three guys. But he has created within his band a tiered leadership, and so a lot of the students he actually has the leadership training during the summer with those students, and trains them on what he wants to see out of them, what his expectations are for them, what the parameters are for them and they do a lot of the leadership in their small groups once they start their band camp."

From drum majors to band captains and individual section leaders, there are positions within the band leadership responsible for distributing sheet music, organizing and storing uniforms, assigning buses and getting the band's wardrobe and equip-

ment from place to place, all with the help of more than a dozen dedicated parents and volunteers connected to the band booster program who help out from week to week.

"It's really an art that he's performed," Garnto said. "When it's time to load up and go somewhere, he's got a loading crew that takes care of everything. It's really a thing to watch."

Dukes was also known to go out of his way to make sure his students had access to the best in terms of instruments, equipment and resources.

"He fought for that band," Rowe said. "He wanted to make sure they were adequately equipped. He would aggravate the superintendent to death wanting to get new equipment for the band, and usually he got it. We'd find some kind of way to get him what he needed because he was such a positive influence. He was persistent. He took care of business, and you couldn't help but reward that."

Looking back, Rowe can take confidence that the choice he and his fellow LCBOE officials made in a band director some 27 years ago was a good one, and perhaps the one hire, of any they made, that might have had the most far-reaching effect on the school system and community.

"It's just amazing what he has done," Rowe said. "The impact he's had on West Laurens, West Laurens athletics, West Laurens attitudes, I can't say enough good things about."



File Photos

Dukes' concert (top left), jazz (bottom left) and marching bands (above) each showcased his detail-oriented passion for excellence (below), boundless love for music and fearless, relaxed stage presence (right).



Thank you for your hard work and dedication to the West Laurens Raider Brigade. We are grateful for the impact you have had on our community. May God richly bless you in your future endeavors.

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2 Chronicles 5:13 NIV



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Whether in the band room or on the practice field, Michael Duker was known for his unique turns of phrase. His memorable sayings, from the funny to the downright profound, served to motivate, encourage, impart wisdom to and often simply share a laugh with his students.

“Loud and Proud.”

“Music isn’t just a hobby, it’s a way of life!”

“Can’t is not a word.”

“Tuba, or not ‘to ba.”

“If you’re on time, you are late.”

“Get some Raider Pride in your heart, dadgummit.”

“Here comes the boom.”

“Follow the man with the hand with the plan.”

“The cream shall rise to the top.”

“A difference is not a difference unless you make it a difference.”

“Good bands glisten, great bands sweat.”

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Beyond the band room

Dukes' impact on students, school difficult to measure

By CLAY REYNOLDS

In his 27 years as director of bands at West Laurens, Michael Dukes contributed in a variety of ways to West Laurens schools and the community, many of which can easily go unnoticed.

Dukes' impact on Dublin-Laurens County, through the monumental band program he built, is far-reaching, but begins with the immense influence he had on his students.

West Laurens High School Principal Clifford Garnto estimates that the longtime band director has taught somewhere in the neighborhood of 2,000-3,000 students in his career. Those many years were not without their effect on many current and former band members who count Dukes a lasting influence on their lives.

"He taught me how to play the trumpet. Playing the trumpet in the band made me who I am today," said WLHS junior Hunter Horne. "Without Mr. Dukes I wouldn't have been who I am today. He showed me how to be a leader and to never stop trying to accomplish a goal just because you think you can't do it. Mr. Dukes has been a role model for me during my time in band."

For students at the high school, band represents a period of 90 minutes each day – more time than is afforded (at least currently) to any other continuous class on the schedule – and almost a quarter of class time for those who take it in each of their eight semesters. Add on time spent in band camp and rehearsals outside the school day, and band might make up close to a third of many students' high school experience.

For that reason, band became a second family, with Dukes as a father-figure, for many students, as well as a source of belonging for others who didn't have a strong family of their own.

"He loves his kids," said Carlos Hand, who assisted Dukes as an associate director from 1996 to 2005 and remains part of the program in retirement. "He wants them to have a good, Christian background, he wants them to know what it's like to have somebody love them and he wants them to know what it's like to be loved and love themselves, to have confidence in themselves."

Equal to his talents as a musician and director were Dukes' skills as a teacher.

Time and again, he proved himself an expert at helping his students master the material, while also imparting a love for the subject, motivation to work hard and an ability to problem-solve.

"It's a lot easier for students to love music than to love algebra, but that's your goal whether you're teaching algebra, or trig or English, is to make your children love the subject and also to let them know that you love them, and that you genuinely care for them and their success," said former Laurens County Schools superintendent and board of education member Bill Rowe.

"My favorite memory of Dukes has to be the



File Photo

Dukes enjoys a moment with several Raider Brigade members before taking the field for a collegiate band day performance at Georgia Southern's Paulson Stadium.

times where I was so stressed out because of my duties in the band," said WLHS senior Jay Nobles, who plays trombone. "No matter what I said, he always had something to turn it around to where there was a positive in it. I will never forget the moments like that, in band behind closed doors where I just need that little boost from him."

Numerous students went on to begin their own careers in music and music education, and credit his influence for catalyzing what is now a lifelong pursuit.

"He cultivated a love for band, and that made me want to be a band director and go into college as a music education major," said Rebekah Daniel, a former WLHS band member and current high school band director working at Houston County High School. "Once I started my music degree, that's when I really fell in love with music in every genre, not just band, but orchestral music, opera, classical. To me, he just instilled a love for band and playing my instrument."

Even with others, for whom the extent of post-high school musicianship would be singing along with the radio or in church on Sundays, band still played an important role.

Garnto believes that involvement in band, like any extracurricular activity from FFA to athletics, has a direct correlation to student success.

"I don't have a definite figure on that, but I would probably say 90 or more percent of those kids graduate," he said. "The graduation rate of kids involved in school events is above those not involved in school events,

because they're plugged in. It's not just the grind of the academics that they sometimes dread, but it's the incentive and the influence of that person encouraging them that keeps that kid on the right path on that track toward graduation."

For band members, and others around the program, Dukes, with his strong faith, served as a spiritual mentor as well.

"He had such a spiritual influence from the day he came. He led our kids in a Christian attitude and a Christian way," Rowe said. "His Christian walk was just such a big influence on everybody around him, students, other teachers."

Dukes' relationship with the West Laurens Middle and High School athletic departments, which ran the entirety of his 26 years at the schools, was one many school officials believe was exceptionally productive.

"He and I developed a great working relationship that turned into an off the field friendship," said Laurens County Schools Athletic Director Jeff Clayton, a longtime coach and AD at West Laurens High. "He's not just your typical band person, but he's also involved in the athletic end of it. He's always trying to do things to get the involvement from the community and the crowd on game nights. He's definitely been a positive for West Laurens High School."

Garnto, who noted that Dukes worked well with each of the many head football coaches he was paired with, said that the band program's draw on Friday nights played a significant role in the crowds the football

See IMPACT page 8

Michael Dukes, in the words of former students...

The Courier Herald reached out to a number of Raider Brigade alumni with the opportunity to express what Dukes means to them, in a paragraph. Here's what several of his former students had to say:

Mr. Dukes was with me in school from 5th grade all the way to graduation. I even brought him my very first buck to show off to him. We've rolled his house more times than I can count and he never got mad, just shot Roman candles over our heads, haha. He was the absolute best teacher/director ever. He was always smiling and always giving out hugs and words of encouragement when we needed them. He taught us discipline and structure while still being our friend/mentor. I hold him in the highest regards and always will. Congratulations on your retirement Dukey!! We love you!!

Danni (Dover) Howard
French Horn, Class of 2006

When I was a freshman in college, I was studying business administration. Mr. Dukes found out about this and reached out to me and told me, "You need to follow God's plan for your life, stop running away from music ministry." I now am a senior at Liberty University finishing a degree in music and worship studies, specializing in biblical studies. He will forever be one of the most influential people in my life.

Lee McDonald
Trumpet, Class of 2014

Mr. Dukes has been such an inspiration to students, members, the community and myself. He has taught me, "If you're on time, you're late" and "Can't is not a word." Mr. Dukes will always be a part of the Raider Nation, no matter where he goes.

Jamie Farmer
Color Guard, Class of 2012

Thank you for encouraging me to chase my dreams. Thank you for teaching me so many life lessons. Thank you for your patience. Thank you for modeling leadership through your example. Thank you for under all circumstances investing in my life and success. The legacy you leave will forever be enshrined in Raider Brigade history and lore.

Heather Harrison
Flute, Class of 2012

Mr. Dukes is so much more than a band director to me. He created a family within West Laurens High School. My band family gave me my

closest friends, adults who I could trust and lean on, and memories that I will cherish forever. I don't think he will ever truly know the impact that he has had on all of his students. I'm so blessed to have had him as not only a band director, but someone who would listen and guide me through high school.

Michaela Brooks
Clarinet, Class of 2017

Mr. Dukes gave me the added confidence I needed to become one of the first black male drum majors at West Laurens High School. He told me in elementary school that one day I would be standing in his spot on the football field, and I accomplished that my senior year. Dukes is much more than a band director, he is a mentor, a friend, and most importantly, a God-fearing man!

Ken Kemp
Saxophone and drum major, Class of 2004

Dukes had an energy that was infectious, and it was obvious he was super passionate about making people excited for Friday nights. He had a way of keeping things light and fun, while also making us work to be the best band we could be. We were all fortunate to learn from his passion, dedication and commitment.

Gantt Jones
Drumline, Class of 2011

Mr. Dukes possessed the power to change an entire community, inspire a crowd and impact a student's life forever. During his time leading the Raider Brigade, he made every student feel valued, heard and important. He saw the potential in every band member, and led them to believe in themselves. From the music to the life lessons, his passion for service was written over everything he did. I'm confident his legacy at West Laurens will live forever. R.P.!

Cameron Keen
Trumpet, Class of 2014

I was in the 6th grade when Mr. Dukes came to West Laurens. I know he can't teach forever, but I am sad that my sons will not have the chance to be taught by him. He always encouraged us to be our best, and if we needed help with something, he was there to help. Every time I see him, I know I will get a hug.

Renee Walker McLendon
Clarinet and color guard, Class of 1999

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Continued from page 7

program was able to draw to games on Friday nights, and the resulting gate proceeds that brought the school revenue.

"He always put out a good product on Friday night," he said. "It was unmatched anywhere we go. No band has compared to the product we put out, which has been an asset for us."

The Raider Brigade, which often carries crowds in the hundreds to road games, served to provide that benefit for other schools as well.

"Everybody loves for West Laurens High School to come to town, because that means they're gonna get paid that night," Clayton said with a chuckle.

Over the years, the band has also served in a number of ways as an ambassador for WLHS to opposing schools.

"Mr. Dukes, as humble as he is, he's never said it, but it's not uncommon for him or myself to get letters from schools or schools we visit complimenting the band and their conduct and their performance," Clayton said. "That happens a couple times a year. We talk about it amongst ourselves, but probably should do it a lot more to promote the kids, just their performances and how they conduct themselves."

Once, according to a story Dukes often tells, the Raider Brigade was called upon to play the national anthem before a road game at a school whose band, and director, failed to show up in time for kickoff. More often, though, the band has combined with that of other schools, frequently cross-town rivals, for joint-pregame performances that are as much a show of unity as a boost to the crowd and team.

Clayton recalls the Raiders' 2014 state quarterfinal matchup against St. Pius X, in which both schools' marching bands performed together before a packed house of fans seated together on the single-sided George B. Maloof Stadium in Atlanta.

"When we came out of that locker room with that crowd and that band... I get chills just now thinking about it, 'cause it was awesome," Clayton said.

The effect of the band and supportive crowd, which the Raiders have rarely been for lack of at home or away stadi-

ums, falls under the mystical "home field advantage" that provides a source of energy for the football team.

No one was more observant of that than former West Laurens skipper John Pate – a firm believer that his team played better when the Raider Brigade was behind them in the stands. Faced with the prospect of making a 3.5-hour road trip to oppose far-flung Haralson County in 2008 without the band in tow, Pate put in a request that the board of education foot the bill for all 300 or more of the students to join them on the 400-mile round trip to Tallapoosa.

His plan worked, as the Raiders won 24-21 in a come-from-behind effort, scoring a standing O during halftime and bringing along a crowd almost equal in number to those representing the home team.

"It's hard to take a team of any type on the road to play a football game, but (even more) to be able to pack up all your uniforms and equipment and go all the way across the state and perform," Pate said. "They put everybody in awe because of how good the show was. That was a long day for us and a long day for them. But that's pretty typical of what (Mr. Dukes) did. He developed a great product... He was a genuinely talented person, and he did a lot for Laurens County Schools."

Clayton, asked his favorite Michael Dukes memory, predictably recalls a football game. This one, the school's first-ever home playoff game at Horseshoe Stadium, ended as a 23-14 Raider win over Bainbridge, in overtime.

"To see the fans and the band rush the field after that game, that's one of those memories you don't ever forget," he said.

Plenty of students' great band experiences, though, came in settings outside of football games, namely parades, band competitions and pep rallies.

In several of his latter years with the school, Dukes also organized trips to perform at college band days, New Year's bowl games, parades at theme parks and other special events, one in which he and East Laurens band director Jonathan Senn joined to lead their combined bands in performing.

The expertise and skills students took away from his band program went beyond just music.

"Dukes has showed me how far respect, discipline and hard work will take you," Nobles said. "He has taught me way more than just how to play an instrument or how to march on a field. He has taught me life lessons and to not accept good enough."

In the many hours he spent working with students, many of Dukes' own qualities as a leader rubbed off on his students, both directly and indirectly.

"He's been able to teach people to lead," Garnto said. "As a leader, we have to be able to train others to help us. It's impossible to do it on your own. He's been able to train those around him to be on the same page that he's on. And he has the charisma to draw kids in, but he has that loving spirit in there to keep them in there with him. He's a very caring, strong Christian guy and his values come forth with his leadership. He truly cares about the kids and their future, not just putting out a good product."

Hand knows firsthand how much of a mission Dukes has made of making sure that students, through their work with music and performance, are made ready to take on the real world with attributes like excellence and hard work.

"You want to make dang sure you've got your kids prepared for life, and he goes at it very hard, he studies it very deeply," he said. "He doesn't leave anything unturned that he can't get the best for his kids. He really doesn't. And I think that's makes him such a good leader of young people."

"If we can't make strong citizens of the kids, then we have failed. I don't care how good they can play, how good they are mechanically."

That charge is one new director Richard Horne, who has worked alongside Dukes for close to nine years, will take on as he takes over the program. He follows a man whose impact has been monumental, as much for his success as his influence – a legacy that will long outlive his time with the band program.

"We have not been disappointed," Garnto said. "I guess the only disappointment is that it's time for his retirement. But we do look forward to Mr. Horne taking over the program, and we do feel confident he's going to be able to continue what Dukes has built."

Continued from page 1

When on his own time, Dukes listens to jazz or country music. He said he listens to jazz to steal ideas. He became interested in country music in the late 1980s and 1990s when it became popular.

He likes the message of both because they do what music should do.

"Music should have passion," he said. "It should prick the heart."

Richard Horne has worked with Dukes for the past eight years and will take over as West Laurens High School band director in July.

"It's been a rewarding experience," Horne said. "I've learned from Mr. Dukes how to make things work."

Like Dukes, Horne graduated from Georgia Southern, but after it became a university. Currently, Horne is based at West Laurens Middle School.

"We get to be involved with students at all levels," he said. "It helps with retention."

Horne said he is looking forward to being the high school band director.



Horne (at left), who has worked under Dukes (right) as an associate director at the middle and high school since 2010, has been tapped to take over the program beginning next year. (Photo by Clay Reynolds)

"I'm very excited about the possibilities," he said. "I've got big shoes to fill. I'm going to do my best to continue the (band) program the way it's been laid out."

While Horne expects to in-

corporate his own ideas, the bulk of the program will remain the same.

"We've got a good thing going at West Laurens," he said. "Why change it?"

Some past photos used in this special section provided to The Courier Herald by Michael Dukes. Others taken from files of The Courier Herald.	Special thanks to Mackenzie Manley and Damita Hodges-Mitchell, as well as other current and former WLHS students, for their contributions to this project.
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