



With a strong past and present, Durham Girls Alumni Band looks to the future

Four years ago, members of the former girl's band in Durham reunited as part of the town's 2012 Homecoming celebrations.

It was envisioned to be a one-time reunion – but was met with such success, it was decided to continue and form the group known as the Durham Girls Alumni Band.

Since then, the band has firmly established itself, playing all across the region.

Member Sharon Pegelo, who serves as recruiter and colour guard instructor, said they usually have between 12 to 15 performances per year.

Events have ranged from fall fairs, Christmas parades, homecomings, church services, entertaining residents at Rockwood Terrace and even birthday parties.

The band has about 20 members, in a wide variety of ages and experiences, who meet weekly on Mondays at 7 p.m. at Spruce Ridge Community School in Durham and they are hoping to add more to their ranks.

The group's name shouldn't be a deterrent to anyone in joining, said music instructor Marilyn Dickson.

“Anybody who is interested is welcome,” Dickson said, as she and Pegelo explained that while many members did play or march previously, no experience is required for membership.

“If Susie can put her left foot in front of her right foot and then her right foot in front of her left foot, and not fall down...we'll find something for her,” Pegelo said. “Preferably at the same time as everybody else,” Dickson jokingly chimed in.

Membership is \$35 a year (free for students).

Carrying on the rich tradition of the original band, which was active from 1949 to 1984, is important to current members.

Originally a high school band, and then a drum corps, the Durham Girls travelled and competed successfully over many years, bringing home provincial and national awards. They even played in a Grey Cup parade.

Kathleen McConnell joined the Alumni Band shortly after the 2012 reunion, learning how to play the baritone.

“I like having the companionship. We are all in a group and cover each other and help each other. It was fun just learning to how to play from the beginning,” McConnell.

Pegelo said she wouldn't trade her drum corps experience “for anything”.

“It's something that has carried me through my life.”

For her, the 2012 Homecoming was surreal.

"I met up with women I hadn't seen in 50 years at the reunion and all of a sudden, we were 17 again," she said.

Dickson said hearing the cheers of the crowd when they are performing creates a "shared experience" for all the members and a "pride in the music."

She added that the community at large always supported the band and has continued to do so with the new incarnation.

"Years ago when we returned from winning competitions, sometimes around 1:00 a.m, the fire truck and many residents would be out to welcome us home and celebrate our victories. We feel those same warm greetings during our Durham parades even now - from cheers and comments. As well, during parades in surrounding communities, Durhamites give us warm welcomes when they see and hear their familiar hometown Durham girls at whatever age," she said.

Kerry Rouse, a member of the band's advisory committee, said that support is not only shown during parades and events but through their fundraising.

"We've had wonderful success with our yard sale, spaghetti dinners, and other fundraising events; and since the first of September, we have sold over 300 Durham Girls Cookbooks with the help of 10 local retailers who are selling them for us and we're not done yet," Rouse said.

The cookbooks contain 150 recipes and dozens of photos of band members, past and present. They are available for \$12. For more information, e-mail dgcookbookteam@bell.net or call 519-369-5031. The band is currently preparing for another reunion next year coinciding with Canada's 150th celebrations.

Rouse said a performance in the parade and two concerts are planned for Canada's Day 2017 and they are inviting new and former members to join them, even if just for that weekend. Rehearsals will begin in April.

There will also be a Durham Girls reunion, open to all current and former members, scheduled to be held on July 2.

For more information on joining the band, contact Pegelo at 519-369-5031 or email durhamgirlsalumni@gmail.com

To book the band, contact Jackie at 519-369-4628.

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