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Stephanie Santos

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Marching Band

STEPHANIE SANTOS

Stephanie is a sophomore majoring in English with a minor in secondary education. She plans to pursue a career as a high school English teacher after completing graduate school.

I joined the New Bedford High School Whalers Marching Band my freshman year of high school. It was a totally new experience for me, and though it was challenging at first, I quickly began to love being in band. It got better and easier for me each year, and though high school marching band had always been a good time, my senior year was by far the most intense and the most fun for me.

When drum major tryouts for my senior year came around, I decided that I really wanted to take on the leadership position. There were two other girls trying out, too, and the band director said he wasn't sure if he was going to have one or two drum majors that year. I practiced for hours every day until the day of tryouts--I was determined to become drum major. All three of us were so nervous the night of the tryouts. I was too tense to go first. I felt like I needed a little more time to relax, so I auditioned second. I walked into the band room where the band director interviewed me with questions, such as how I would improve the band, and why I wanted to become drum major. Next, I had to conduct a portion of the field show from the last season. I was shaking. I felt like I had ruined the whole audition. Next, I was asked to conduct the "Star Spangled Banner". When I left the band room, I talked to the girl who had auditioned before me, and she said that she had made a few mistakes, too. We both found comfort in that. That night, the band director and the other judges had a tough decision to make.

One week later, we had band rehearsal, and the director had told us that he would announce the two drum majors at the end. We were excited that he decided on two because it's a little scary going into such a tough position alone. At the end, he could see the anticipation on our faces so he purposely dragged on with mindless announcements. He stared at each of us straight in the eye and chuckled at how anxious we were getting. It felt like the finale of *American Idol* when Ryan Seacrest drags everything on. Then suddenly, he came right out and said, "Your new drum majors are Steph..." I was in shock! I didn't even move for a second. I was in disbelief that I had been chosen.

My band had not won a New England Championship since my freshman year, so I was determined to lead the band to another championship. I kept a close eye on things and tried my best to be a good drum major. I talked to the staff when I had problems, and I told the band that if they ever had a problem with anything I'd be there to help. Everything worked out well and I was praised many times for my ability to control and befriend the band members.

Marching band competition season runs from late September to early November. Even though the season is short, it takes months of practice to make a field show perfect. Weekly rehearsals begin in July and run throughout the summer. These rehearsals are short and serve mainly as a review for summer parades. Some years we actually receive the field show music early, so rehearsals are also used to work on the first song. The last two weeks of August are the most intense. During this time (known as "band camp") we rehearse five to six days a week for at least five hours each day. Rehearsals consist of learning and memorizing three to four songs which form different parts of one show, and memorizing "dots." Dots are spots on the football field that players must get to in order to form a shape with the rest of the band. The marching corresponds to the music. For example, when the music is building in volume and getting to a big hit, the band may march forward in a straight line across the football field towards the audience, and at that hit, the players may halt and snap their heads and instruments up (a horn pop) for dramatic effect. A completed field show lasts about 8-10 minutes.

Bands are separated by size for competitions. There are five divisions, division one consisting of very small bands, and division five consisting of very large bands. This makes judging fairer because a 120-person band looks and sounds very different from a 20-person band.

It is tradition that the seniors throw a surprise party with the theme of the field show on the day of the first competition. It was hard keeping everything secret. The upperclassmen knew there was going to be a party because it was a tradition, but the freshman had no idea. Together, the seniors and I planned a great surprise. Since our field show was music from the musical, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, we dressed up like the characters and decorated accordingly. I wore bell bottoms, a peasant top, and a ribbon around my forehead. We covered an old mural in the band room with six plastic table sheets. Then, we wrote everyone's name on a star and formed a bigger star with the smaller ones. Also, we made a "purple carpet" out of purple table sheets leading to the band room door. We tried to keep the psychedelic seventies theme, so we used purple instead of red. Each band member and staff member got a bag of candy, a balloon, a crown, and a t-shirt bearing the name of our show. Everyone agreed that it was very creative, and it put everyone in the mood to compete.

The first competition of the year gave me flashbacks. I felt like I did at my first competition freshman year. I was so nervous that I would mess something up. This was very different from being on the field because if I made a mistake, the whole band would make mistakes. It was the first time I would be up on the podium in front of a huge crowd of people at a competition. I was nervous that I might mess up our salute to the judges. Luckily, I did it without a problem. Once I got up on the podium, so many thoughts went through my head. What if I forget the counts and conduct in the wrong time? What if I cause a tempo tear? What if I mess up really bad and the judges notice, or worse, what if the band gets confused and the whole show is ruined?! I had butterflies in my stomach, but I cleared my mind and started the show. Halfway through our first song, I became very comfortable, and I started to enjoy it. I got really into it and the band performed fairly well. However, we placed second in our division, and that ruined the night for me.

The next important competition was our home competition. This is always a big deal and it's a lot of fun. This competition draws many more fans than others. We were so excited about performing for our parents and friends. However, it started to rain. We figured it would stop before the show but it didn't. We really didn't want to cancel it. The seniors and I begged our band director not to cancel the show. The competition went on, but not as we would have liked. Many bands decided not to show up because of the weather conditions. As it got closer to our performance time, the rain got worse and many students in the previous bands had slipped and fallen. We had a big decision to make. Did we want to just stand there and play our music or did we want to march and put on a great show? At any other competition, this would've been easy. We would've decided to "park and play" so that no one got hurt, but this was our home show. We couldn't let the audience down. Even despite the rain, the stands were full. We went out there in good spirits, and I had the most fun I had ever had conducting. I was into the music and the band noticed. They were hitting every set perfectly and we sounded amazing. I could hear the audience scream and yell with excitement after every big hit. The audience's delight drove everyone to perform at their best. In the back of my mind, I was hoping that no one would fall. A few slips here and there were obvious, but no one had actually fallen. It was amazing. We had performed to the best of our ability and the audience loved it. As we marched off the field, we had huge smiles on our face. Some of the seniors came off the field crying tears of joy. I felt like crying too, but I couldn't get the smile off of my face. I continued smiling all night. The rain got worse as the night went on, and many bands left. We didn't even have a proper awards ceremony. However, we had won first place, best color guard, best percussion, and best music. We swept everyone in our division and we received the best overall score of the competition.

The day after our home competition, we realized that we had to put our big win behind us and look forward to finals. We won the rest of our competitions and the drum line continued to be undefeated. I began to feel optimistic about finals. I couldn't wait until the big show. Everyone worked so hard, and we finally started having serious rehearsals.

The day of Finals, the band parents threw a party in the band room. This has always been a tradition, too. They did such a wonderful job and everyone loved it. The room was decorated with pictures of everyone, balloons, candy, streamers, and they had put together a slide show of the band throughout the season. Once again, everyone got candy and balloons, but the seniors got an extra treat. The parents had blown up pictures of our heads and taped them to a hanger, and then they hung tie-die shirts on the hanger and placed marching shoes underneath. They formed little people. They were complete with psychedelic glasses, a head band, and a peace sign necklace. This let us relax a little bit and have some fun before we set off for the competition in Quincy.

Once there, everyone put their game face on. We were determined to win. Everyone worked together, we had pep talks, and we did group activities to get our minds set on teamwork. Without teamwork, it would be impossible to win. I went to every single person in the band and wished them good luck. I had butterflies in my stomach again. I didn't think I could bear to lose another championship.

We marched onto the field in two single file lines grasping hands. Everyone had a death grip on their partner's hand. Once I gave the signal, the band got into formation. I marched to the back of the field and conducted warm ups. The sound was warm and perfectly in tune. Once I gave the signal to turn around, the band snapped into position perfectly. I walked back up to the front and faced the band. As I was waiting for the judge to announce us, I looked everyone in the eye one more time. I could see the concentration and determination in their eyes. I knew they would put their heart and soul into this performance. The judge announced us, the other drum major and I saluted, and the audience burst into cheers and applause. New Bedford is known for its excellence, so we have many fans despite our two-year losing streak. Even so, we could still tell where our parents were seated; they went crazy!

I stepped up onto the podium and started the show. The band was concentrating so hard, and I could tell they were having fun too. We performed even better than we did at our home show. It was amazing. I hadn't felt that good about a performance since the last time we had won. Once again, I felt like I was a part of the music and I was swept away in how amazing we looked and sounded. The last big hit was tremendous. I didn't know

we could play so loud and still sound good! During that hit, it was obvious that everyone put every last bit of energy into the performance. It was especially noticeable in the drum line. One of the snare players even jumped as he played his last note. I could see the enthusiasm in everyone's eyes. I had the chills at the end of the show. As we marched off the field and passed the audience in review, I saluted the judges with a big smile. At the end of the track, our band director and staff members were dancing in excitement. Once we got off the field, we burst into laughter and excitement.

Everyone was extremely anxious to find out who had won. The bands sat on the track, and the drum majors and color guard captains stood on the field. I clasped hands with the other drum major and one of our color guard captains. Everyone was so nervous. The band was sitting right in front of us on the track. They were holding hands, too. When they got to our division, the anticipation was getting to us. We just had to know who had won! Everyone's eyes were closed tightly, and I could see everyone crossing their fingers. It was extremely difficult for me to stand and look professional while they announced the smaller awards. We won best percussion and best color guard. I got worried when we found out that our rival had won best music.

The announcer started at the bottom and worked his way up to third place. You could hear my band's sighs of relief after each place was called. When they said another band had won third place, everyone relaxed just for a second. Then, the big moment came. There were two bands left--our rival and us. The announcer procrastinated a bit, and then he said the other band's name! I immediately smiled and swallowed my urge to celebrate. It would have been rude to show our excitement before they announced us. The color guard captain had squeezed my hand so tight at the sound of the other band's name. My band shifted in preparation to jump up and celebrate. Then the announcer said, "...and in first place, with a gold medal and a score of 94.0, that's nine four point zero, the New England Scholastic Band Association's 2005 champion is the New Bedford High School Whalers Marching Band!" I got the chills again and everyone jumped and screamed. I couldn't believe my ears. The stadium erupted in cheers. We had finally won!

As soon as the ceremony was over, the band got up and tackled me in excitement. Everyone wanted to see the three-foot trophy I had had the honor of collecting. We marched in excitement with the trophy held high in the air all the way to the bus. We sang "We Are the Champions" the whole way there.

The bus ride home was so much fun. Once we got off the highway, we had police escorts all the way to the school. Along the route, fans beeped their horns and yelled out their windows.

All of this was going on at one o'clock in the morning! It was a blast. The school parking lot was packed with fans and we were greeted with beeping horns and excited parents. It was the most exciting bus ride since our last big win three years ago.

Being in marching band taught me a lot. I grew up in so many ways. I finally learned to be more outspoken and not so shy. I'm more confident in everything I do because of my drum major experience. Before being drum major, whenever leadership positions came my way, I never went for them because I was afraid of failure. There were plenty of times when I "failed" as drum major, but I always found a way to fix the problem. Because of this, I'm not afraid to fail anymore--nobody's perfect. I've made life-long friends with many of the students in my band, and marching band fulfilled my competitive spirit more than sports ever had. Even though I've graduated, I still attend many competitions, and I still feel like I am a part of the band. I wouldn't be surprised if I become a staff member in the near future.