

East Ramapo's getting the band back together



Mareesa Nicosia, mnicosia@lohud.com 9:57 p.m. EDT October 2, 2014



(Photo: Joe Larese/The Journal News)

SPRING VALLEY – The East Ramapo marching band has gotten its favorite drill sergeant back and students are lining up by the dozens to salute him.

Under a new arrangement this year, veteran music teacher [Michael Smith \(/story/news/education/hall-monitor/2014/09/29/nyacks-mike-smith-a-semi-finalist-in-2015-grammy-music-educator-awards/16434753/\)](#) — the East Ramapo band's founding director — is splitting his time between his alma mater and Nyack, where he's worked the last two years.

Smith's [28-year career in East Ramapo \(http://archive.lohud.com/article/20120708/NEWS03/307080040/Beloved-music-man-lands-his-feet\)](#) ended when he was laid off with more than 90 other staffers during [the district's budget crisis \(/longform/news/education/2014/09/17/east-ramapo-district-crisis/15775703/\)](#) in June 2012. He was immediately scooped up by the Nyack district, where he recently received tenure and continues to lead multiple bands.

"His loss was a great loss felt by our school community and I just took a shot to see if he'd be interested and available to work," said Arthur Fisher, East Ramapo's assistant superintendent for personnel and secondary education.

The marching band's roughly \$50,000 budget survived the cuts and continued under two different directors (the first was laid off from her teaching job after a year). But without Smith's leadership, momentum fizzled and attendance dropped off.



Members of the East Ramapo marching band practice at Spring Valley High School under the direction of newly returned band director Michael Smith. Joe Larese/The Journal News

Fisher said participation has doubled to about 70 students since the announcement in late August that Smith was back.

Students and parents are thrilled, and the feeling is mutual, Smith said. But the reunion has been bittersweet, he added, [because the program has changed a lot \(http://archive.lohud.com/VideoNetwork/1824941841001/East-Ramapo-Mike-Smith-s-marching-band\)](#) in his absence.

"It was heart-wrenching (to go back to the Spring Valley football field) because the students don't have the resources that they need or that they had in the past," he said. "I started that band. My own children went through that band. I met my wife through that band.... I'm going back to a different Square One than what I left."

Smith graduated from Spring Valley High School in 1975 and returned in 1984 to nurture a 15-member marching band into a nationally recognized program that once boasted more than 100 students from all grade levels. The band competed frequently around the country, performed at landmark venues like the Apollo Theater in Manhattan and even appeared in a film.

With Smith's return comes a revival of his culture of discipline. Students are proud to bring their A+ papers to rehearsal for him to praise, and live in fear he'll find out they goofed off in class. They love that being in the band demands time-management skills, academic excellence, teamwork and self

confidence.



Members of the East Ramapo marching band march in front of the decrepit bleachers at Spring Valley High School that have been off-limits this year. About 70 middle and high school kids, including members of the band, color-guard and assistant conductors practiced with newly returned band director Michael Smith at Spring Valley High School Sept. 29, 2014. (Photo: Joe Larese/The Journal News)

"We don't just come here to play our instruments," said drum major Mikayla Kimble, a Ramapo High School senior.

Fisher likens Smith's return to the district's rebuilding process after years of failed budget votes and financial disarray that felled a major blow to East Ramapo's sports, clubs, music and art programs.

The district got a state aid increase this year and found grants to support after-school and extended-day enrichment programs for a couple of years. More than 70 teachers and support staff were hired back this fall and middle school sports are being restored.

"East Ramapo's coming back," Fisher said. "The new ([building repairs proposal \(/story/news/education/2014/09/22/east-ramapo-officials-pitch-m-plan-fix-school-buildings/16082205/\)](http://www.lohud.com/story/news/education/2014/09/22/east-ramapo-officials-pitch-m-plan-fix-school-buildings/16082205/)) is another piece of evidence that we've bottomed out and we're rebuilding."

Students and parents say an important part of the rebuilding process will be re-funding the state-mandated elementary music and art curriculum, which all but disappeared in 2013. With the elimination of those teachers went the marching band's feeder program; this year about half the band is made up of color guard members who have little or no musical instrument experience.

"There's a rich tradition here so people want to be part of it," said volunteer May Neils, whose husband, Christopher, runs the parents association to raise money for band competitions, snacks and supplies. Their son, Andrew, is band president and drum captain.

"I'm hoping (the district) can find a way to put (elementary music) back," she said. "Students need stuff like this to help them feel like they belong."

In the Spring Valley High School gym Monday, Kimble danced from side to side, tilting her head back to strike the high notes of Michael Jackson's "Thriller" on her tenor sax. Color guard flags churned. A twirler gently prodded the girl in front of her to straighten out their line.

There was thudding percussion and then, the gym fell silent.

"Feet together! Chin up! Project urgency!" Smith bellowed. "Do it again, do it again, do it again."

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Strike up the band

Port Chester marching band director Bob Vitti considers himself blessed.



The Port Chester High School Marching Band in the Port Chester Columbus Day parade in 2012. (Photo: Carucha L. Meuse/ The Journal News)

While music and art programs are often the first casualties of district budget cuts, Port Chester is among a handful of Lower Hudson Valley districts that consistently prioritizes its thriving music program.

"We come from a wide range of demographics," Vitti said. "But one thing (the district) does support strongly is the arts. We have a superintendent that is incredibly supportive of our music program, our art program; We have a Board of Education that supports what we do and how we do it. And that's the key. And the bottom line is the community supports it."

The powerhouse marching band Vitti has led for 30 years has grown to one of the largest in the area — 135 students — and it travels at least once a week to compete at the regional, state and national level.

Vitti also directs a wind ensemble, concert band and winter percussion. The high school program benefits from a good feeder system, he said, because Port Chester offers students a music curriculum starting in fourth grade.

"I look at music as building the mind," Vitti said. "It's a discipline, definitely a discipline to be involved in a music or a sport... Obviously the academics are the main thing but, to me, music is a discipline that helps those kids in the academics."

The band took back-to-back victories over the weekend 9/27 at the U.S. Bands Circuit and the Musical Arts Conference (MAC) in Connecticut. It will perform in the Yamaha Cup competition at the MetLife stadium in November and give a hometown performance at the Capitol Theatre next year.. It spent six days in lower Manhattan to perform for the shooting of "Spider-Man 3" with Tobey McGuire and was also featured in the 1994 remake of "Miracle on 34th Street."

Here are highlights from the long list of achievements by other local high school marching bands:



The Brewster High School Marching Band marches Dublin, Ireland, during the 2013 St. Patrick's Festival Parade. (Photo: Guy Thomas)

The **Brewster** High School band is a repeat performer in New York City's St. Patrick's Day parade and, in 2012, serenaded a wedding proposal on the Intrepid Sea-Air-Space Museum that was carried on the Today show. In 2013, the band played in Dublin for St. Patrick's Day.

The **Harrison** High School band has also marched in New York City's St. Patrick's Day parade and, in 2012, performed at the annual Pearl Harbor memorial ceremony.

The **Nyack** High School band was featured in the pilot episode of the HBO series "The Leftovers" this year, after a shoot in Nyack in 2013.

The **Suffern** High School (Ramapo Central district) band is slated to lead a parade in Disney World on Veteran's Day and march in New York City's Columbus Day parade this year.

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