



Fanfare for the Uncommon Band

- *Why Vernissage Magazine chose to investigate*

Preview to an Exclusive Vernissage Magazine Investigation

It is a glorious fall Saturday.

Breathe the crisp, clean air. Walk across hillsides of walnut and hickory that wave luminous gold leaves against brilliant blue sky, as if to beckon the gathering throng of fans.

The fans, too, are adorned in gold and blue, lured by the siren call of tradition. The stadium atmosphere shivers in anticipation.

Listen: the distant drums grow nearer. A hush falls over the crowd.

Suddenly, as if shot from a musket, hundreds of musicians burst onto the field, racing 220 beats per minute; two steps every second. Abruptly, they halt. Fifteen-score instruments sound in fanfare.

Sixty-thousand fans roar in unison. Their emotion is palpable.



“I cry when they come out,” says Sandra Huck. “So much pride!”

“It always puts a lump in my throat,” adds Rita Christopher-Close.

Fall Saturdays may revolve around football, but at West Virginia University the marching band is revered.

“Best university band in all of America,” says Del Phillips.

The Pride of West Virginia. A sports announcer called them that during the 1975 Peach Bowl. The name stuck. Nearly fifty years later, The Pride firmly remains a symbol of everything West Virginians believe their state exemplifies: nose-to-the-grindstone, blue-collar ethic, and dedication.

Consider this: The Pride of West Virginia has been marching since 1901.

The John Phillips Sousa Foundation presented The Pride with its highest honor, an award the Los Angeles Times calls, ‘The Heisman Trophy of the collegiate band world.’ It recognizes The Pride for decades of excellence, to the point that WVU’s marching band has ‘made outstanding contributions to the American way of life,’ by setting an example for other bands around the country.



Today, Pride alumni direct the marching bands of other major universities, including Auburn, South Carolina, and Cincinnati. The director of the University of Alabama marching band started out as a Pride saxophonist.

WVU fan Patti Rose firmly believes The Pride of West Virginia is, “Absolutely, without a doubt, the best college band in the nation.”

But The Pride’s practice facilities don’t stack up.

Many university bands have on-campus complexes with dedicated practice fields, and rehearsal and storage areas.

The Pride of West Virginia practices on the basketball arena parking lot.

So, friends of The Pride, including the WVU Alumni Band, decided: if the university wouldn't pay to build The Pride a dedicated practice space, they would raise the money for one.



“The whole point is the band deserves a good facility on campus,” says alumni Brian Roberts.

Plans for the Pride Practice Facility included an artificial-turf replica of the stadium football field with stadium lights for autumn evening practices, a tower for the band director to oversee drills, climate-controlled storage building, and a covered music rehearsal pavilion. This state-of-the-art facility would put The Pride on equal-footing with other big university bands.



One of the Pride Practice Facility architectural renderings used to raise over \$1.25 million from donors for construction.

Fundraising began about four years ago. The WVU Foundation – the university non-profit charged with collecting and safeguarding donations – created a special fund designated solely for the promised on-campus Pride Practice Facility, and started soliciting contributions.

WVU's Athletic Department chipped in, giving The Pride the site of Hawley Field, the former university baseball stadium, on which to build the practice complex. It's located on the Evansdale Campus, just a couple hundred yards from the band's current parking practice lot practice site.

“The practice facility will be located on the Evansdale campus, replacing Hawley Field, the old home of WVU Baseball.”

– WVU Foundation Donor Solicitation

An architectural firm was hired to develop a site plan and facility renderings.

In just four years, the band raised over \$1.25 million, all of it from private donors.

By March of 2021, enough money had been raised for WVU to issue a request for construction bids. In October of that year, WVU held a ceremonial groundbreaking on the Evansdale Campus.

And then... nothing.

Until late October, 2023... when it was announced that The Pride would not get its on-campus practice facility after all. The band's donated funds would be used to build a football field for them to practice on at a privately-owned recreation center five miles away from campus. The Pride will practice on it... but it will also be rented out for the benefit of the park.

Donors call it a bait-and switch. Unethical. Quite possibly illegal. But the University and the WVU Foundation – despite being legally obligated to safeguard contributions – are determined to follow through with the scheme to divert donor funds to benefit a private entity.



This is where donors were promised the facility will be built...



This is where their donations will build a recreational field.

Now, 123 years of tradition and a beloved Mountain State icon is endangered.

Nothing about moving The Pride of West Virginia off-campus made sense. What few explanations university administrators provided just didn't seem to add up.

That's when *Vernissage Magazine* decided to look into the issue. The result is our continuing series of articles, which we have titled, *The Pride and Prevarication*.

*The first duty of man is the seeking after
and investigation of the truth.*

– Cicero

The articles that follow over the coming weeks are the product of more than four months of investigation. Information presented is based on public records on file at the university, local, state, and federal levels; open social media posts and chatroom communications; commercial media and organization press releases; audio, video, and other digitally-recorded material; and

documents and email communications of WVU employees obtained by *Vernissage Magazine* through the use of the Freedom of Information Act.

In the next ***Vernissage Magazine*** article:

- *If a picture is worth a thousand words, these photographs speak volumes. A look at what donors were promised when they contributed to build The Pride a state-of-the-art practice facility, and where their money is going.*