



## Pride Practice Facility: WVU Students Shamed and Silenced

- *WVU's Director of Bands Students calls students complaining about a Mylan Park practice site, "An embarrassment to their school and state."*
- *WVU Dean says the idea of asking students their opinion is "Delusional."*

*Exclusive: A Vernissage Magazine Investigation – Part 3*

Members of the West Virginia University marching band – known as the Pride of West Virginia – have been awaiting a promised new Pride Practice Facility for years.

Their hopes were dashed during Homecoming Week in October, 2023. That's when band members were told money donated for the project will instead be used to build an artificial turf multi-purpose field at Mylan Park, a privately-owned complex that serves as a community recreation center.

The announcement took band members and alumni by surprise. Over the last four years some 4,000 alumni and friends of the Pride have donated about \$1.25 million to The Pride Practice Facility fund. University and WVU Foundation solicitations for the for donations were clear: The Pride Practice Facility would be built on the Evansdale Campus site of Hawley Field, the former WVU baseball stadium, which the WVU Athletic Department gave to the band for its new facility.



*The Pride Practice Facility as presented to prospective donors*

But in the Homecoming Week announcement, band members and alumni were told that, instead of the state-of-the-art complex depicted in numerous donor solicitations, starting next fall the band will practice on an athletic field being built with their donated funds at Mylan Park.

Mylan Park is five miles away from the WVU campus. There are no arrangements for transporting band members to the practice site.

***Band members had concerns.***

When students and alumni asked how members of the Pride are expected to get to Mylan Park, WVU's Band Office released a statement: "...students and alumni are familiar with the culture of ride-sharing."

The more than 300 members of The Pride of West Virginia are expected to carpool to band practice.

Mylan Park is five miles away. A West Virginia Department of Transportation assessment found the main road to Mylan Park "deficient" and a "corridor with a significant number of crashes" a dozen years ago.

Some band members balked.

At WVU, being in the marching band is a for-credit college class. Students pay fees to march in the Pride. A state resident pays about \$790 a semester for two credit hours; non-residents pay about \$1,900.

What other class, Pride members asked, requires students to carpool off campus to attend? Others wondered: How will the need to leave campus early to get to Mylan Park in WVU's extended college town rush hours affect students who must take late-afternoon classes required by their majors?

Within days of the announcement, WVU's student newspaper, *The Daily Athenaeum*, ran an article about the plan to move the Pride's practices to Mylan Park. Band members were interviewed, many saying they were worried about the effects distance and lack of transportation may have on the Pride's future.



*The main route to Mylan Park*

Freshman clarinet player Riley Wessman told the newspaper she is concerned about getting to and from the new facility. "I just want to know how transportation will work," she told the paper, "because it's been kind of hard getting rides." Rachel said: "It's more convenient to be by the Coliseum in my opinion."

Another Pride member said they were worried about the added time it would take to get to the new location, especially given heavy afternoon traffic: "Between 12 to four is absolutely horrible, so I feel like people are going to have to plan to leave earlier."

On social media Pride senior Hannah Neiman said, “I have heard from a few underclassmen saying they are unlikely to return because of the new location.”

As more details about the Mylan Park site emerged, the newspaper published a second article, featuring concerns of alumni and donors.

But suddenly, students were no longer outspoken.

### ***Silencing the Pride***

At the next home football game, alumna donor Alicia Mazon asked some Pride band members their opinions. The students told her they were no longer permitted talk about to the public the Mylan plan. “I was told by current band members that they have been told not to speak out,” Alicia said.

Contacted by *Vernissage Magazine*, Neiman confirmed that band section leaders had been instructed to contact her fellow instrumentalists and tell them not to speak out negatively about the Mylan Park plan. “Apparently, section leaders were told to tell everyone not to talk to the media,” she said. “I wonder if (the band office) knew the general feelings from the band (that members are) unhappy about the location.”

Another individual – a high school band director – was told by a former student who is now a Pride member that they and their fellow students were being told to not speak out about the Mylan site.

“Silencing the current band members was such a concern of mine,” alumna Krista Baumgardner-Tetrick wrote in a donor chatroom. “I cannot express my sorrow and disheartenment that this concern has proven true.”

In a letter to WVU Dean of Creative Arts Keith Jackson, an alumni donor – whose name is redacted by WVU’s Freedom of Information office from the document provided to *Vernissage Magazine*– complained about the mistreatment of students who openly expressed concerns about the Mylan Park plan. The writer is a high school music teacher who says that they have, “sent many students (to WVU) for their Music Education degrees.” The writer goes on to say: “I don’t like hearing that the students – my students – were told they were an embarrassment to their school or state by their Director of Bands.”

While the university employee who reportedly mistreated students is not named in the document, WVU’s Director of Bands is Scott Tobias, who reports to Jackson. Tobias and Jackson refused to respond to questions from *Vernissage Magazine*.

Some university instructors who learned of the belittling and silencing of students were angered: “The band staff should want to know and care what the students think,” wrote one WVU professor, who chose to remain anonymous for fear of



*Scott Tobias*

administrative repercussions. “A few of my advisees are in the band. Students should be allowed to voice their concerns and opinions, because it is they who will be affected.”

Another source on the WVU campus said, “Quite literally every current member I’ve personally spoken to about the new field wishes to stay on the current (practice) lot if Mylan Park is the other proposed option.” But, he told *Vernissage Magazine*, band members have been threatened into silence: “It was implied that some kind of adverse action would be taken against them if they were to speak out.”

“When they started rebuking the band students,” Sibray said, “I knew something was really wrong.”

### ***Student Opinion Derided***

In other documents obtained by *Vernissage Magazine*, WVU administrators exhibit disdain for the opinions of marching band students.

In late October, alumna Taylor Hall had a lengthy chat exchange with Monongalia County Commissioner Tom Bloom, who documents show helped facilitate the scheme to divert the Pride Practice Facility funds. During their chat, Hall suggested polling band member opinions about the Mylan Park move: “I would love to see a vote of the band members,” she wrote.

The documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show that Bloom sent a transcript of his chat with Hall to WVU Dean Keith Jackson. Jackson’s response is derisive: “Student vote? Wow, she is delusional.”

In response, Bloom told Jackson that Hall and other alumni who expressed concerns about the Mylan Park scheme, were “instigators” and “entitled Karens”.

*Vernissage Magazine* contacted Hall, now married with the last name Kinney, to ask her thoughts about the comments of Bloom and Jackson: “Their remarks are so childish. The fact that they don’t realize that what they’re saying could become public knowledge is amazing to me, especially given their public positions. This isn’t about us,” Kinney said. “This is about current students and future band members. They’re the ones who are affected. I think the fact that they refuse to take student perspective into account is terrible.”

*Keith Jackson (left):*

*Concerned alumni are “delusional.”*

*Tom Bloom (right):*

*“They are Entitled Karens.”*



***“We never want to censor a person’s right to free speech...”***

If any student members of the Pride of West Virginia marching band were forbidden to speak out, it would constitute a violation of West Virginia state law, and of the rules of the West Virginia University Board of Governors. West Virginia code explicitly protects free speech on state college campuses:

*“Any person who wishes to engage in protected and lawful expressive activity on campus shall be permitted to do so freely... activities protected under... this code include, but are not limited to, any lawful verbal and nonverbal speech.” [WV Senate Bill 657]*

The law provides recourse to students whose rights are violated, noting: “Any person or student association aggrieved by a violation of this article may bring an action against the public institution of higher education and its employees acting in their official capacities, responsible for the violation...”

In addition to state law, the West Virginia University Board of Governors Rule 1.8 - Freedom of Expression, states:

*“The West Virginia University Board of Governors acknowledges a First Amendment right of free speech and assembly and encourages open dialogue...”*

Student members of the Pride of West Virginia have the protected right to freely express opinions about the proposed marching band practice facility. Their right is confirmed by West Virginia University President E. Gordon Gee, who is on record in a 2016 address to the “Mountaineer Family” of alumni, students, and faculty:

*“We never want to censor a person’s right to free speech. It is through listening to people who think differently from others that we learn... I believe that is one of the most valuable experiences one can have on a college campus...The University will always be committed to creating an open forum that supports free speech.”*

To many alumni and donors, the enforced silence of students spoke loudly:

“If you have to threaten people to keep quiet,” wrote alumni Zach Bloom (no relation to Tom Bloom), “your idea probably sucks. That alone should be enough to fire a few people.”

### ***Band Members Fear Retribution***

In preparation for this article *Vernissage Magazine* reached out to band members. Most did not respond. One student who did, told *Vernissage* that “the band office wasn’t happy” that some students had spoken to journalists: “I know the donor response to the (Mylan Park) move wasn’t the greatest, and I can understand not wanting to be negative as it could feed into those concerns.”



That student told *Vernissage* they believe that while a field at Mylan Park isn't ideal, a practice field for the Pride is long overdue, "There're pros and cons," the student said.

But after the first two articles in this series appeared the student contacted *Vernissage* and asked to have their name removed from this article; they feared retribution from university administrators.

"I don't want my name to be out there," they said. "I just don't want any backlash from the band office. I feel it's better to be safe than sorry."

Even though the band member's opinion about the Mylan Park field was largely neutral, they were scared of reprisals from band administrators for speaking out: "I don't want to be in hot water with them."

Another student, who previously had told *Vernissage* that they had personal knowledge that band members were silenced through section leaders, changed their story in a follow-up interview. That student declined to confirm their original comments, and asked to not be named in this article.

Contacted by *Vernissage Magazine*, College of Creative Arts Dean Keith Jackson, and Director of Bands Scott Tobias – through a university spokesperson – refused to answer questions or to comment on the content of this article.

*Vernissage Magazine* submitted questions to WVU administrators, asking about the ethical and legal implications of university students being silenced. A WVU spokesperson responded for the administration, saying: "We have no comment currently."

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

- ***Mylan Park's President claims: "We're seeing an opportunity to build an additional athletic field, but I can't let the cat out of the bag..."***
- ***A Mylan Park board director boasts: "With the dollars the Pride has raised, we could install another field..."***



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