

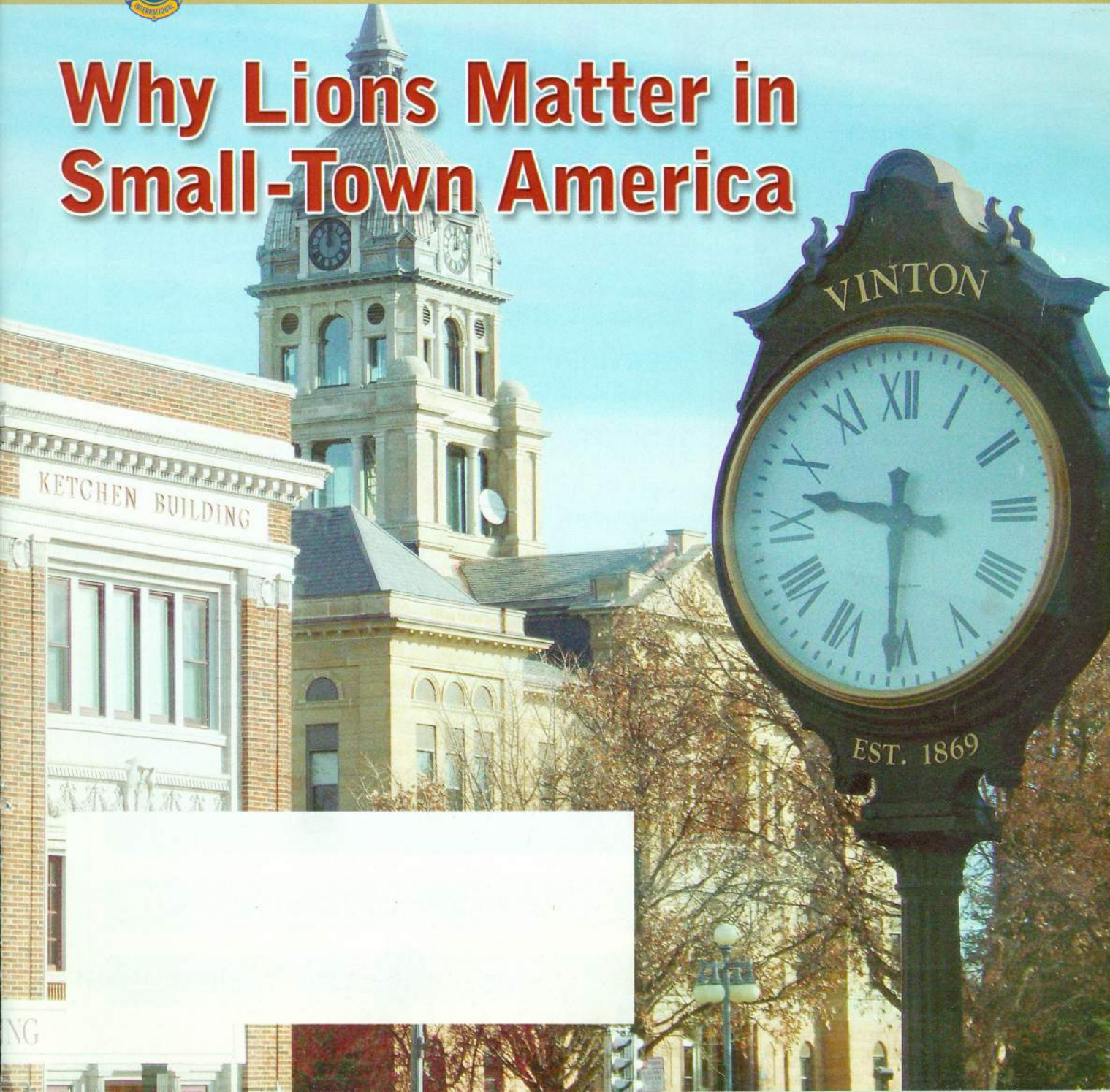
# LION



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## Why Lions Matter in Small-Town America



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# MARCHING

## INTO HISTORY

### Blind Marching Band Part of Roses Parade

by Cliff Terry

Dedicated college football fans probably know that when Ohio State plays its home games, the marching band spells out "Script Ohio" to the tune of "Le Regiment de Sambre et Meuse." The crowd roars when a musician dots the i. But at other times in Columbus, another marching band employs a similar spelling drill. The unique difference is that it's called "Script Braille Ohio."

That's because the students are members of the Ohio State School for the Blind Marching Band—the only blind marching band in the country and, undoubtedly, the world.

Playing only since 2005, the band has been featured in newspapers and national network TV programs, and, incredibly, marched in the 2010 Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena this January, the first blind marching band to do so. The trip was financed in large part by various Lions clubs in Ohio—another instance of Lion involvement with issues concerning eyesight.

Other "Marching Panthers" engagements in 2009 included Ohio School for the Deaf football games, the Millersport Corn Festival Parade, the Wellston Coal Festival Parade and the Circleville Pumpkin Show Parade.

They also performed at an Ohio State Skull Session (football pep rally) in 2008 before an audience of 12,000 Buckeye fans.

Carol Agler, music director at the Ohio State School for the Blind (kindergarten through high school), who is sighted, co-directs with technology instructor Dan Kelley, blind since birth. After starting a regular band program in 1998, Agler initiated the marching band in 2005 at the invitation of the Ohio School for the Deaf, also in Columbus. The school was reviving its football program after a 33-year hiatus. The marching band performed half-time shows at home games. "I jumped at the opportunity," she says. "Our staff thought it was really cool. I'm not sure what other people thought about a blind marching band. I mean, I certainly thought, 'How am I going to do it?'"



Band members, helped by marching assistants, put on a memorable show at halftime.

The marchers began with 13 members, and this year there are 34, with three alumni. Seven of the high school musicians and one alum are sighted, and the rest are totally blind.

Asked about people's initial reaction, Kelley answers, "Some humorous, some amazement: 'How can you do that?' 'How do you keep them from running into each other?' But it's been pretty positive for the most part. I really wasn't dubious because I marched in a high school band, and I wanted our kids to have that experience."

All right, so how do you keep them from running into each other? "Right away I realized we needed volunteer marching assistants placed beside or behind the members to avoid collisions," Agler says. "It was tough at first because the kids were hanging onto them instead of playing. I explain to the assistants that they'll have to guide them by putting hands on their shoulders, and if the kids really get independent, just hold onto loops on their band jackets."

The number of marching assistants varies. They include two grandparents, Agler's husband and daughter, a retired band director and even the man who directs the buses where to park at Ohio State football games.

"This is really a feel-good story, just such a wonderful thing," says Rondia Sexton, second vice president of the Millersport Lions Club. "The band makes people realize that we've come a long way since a blind child was locked away in a mental institution. It's just such a big honor for these kids to say, 'Wow, I'm involved in something like this.' They have such challenges in life anyway, and for them to get this extra opportunity, it shows the world that handicapped doesn't mean disabled."

Lou Mazzoli, retired superintendent of the Ohio State School for the Blind and a member of the Columbus Northeast Lions Club, agrees. "The stereotype is that you can't imagine blind kids playing in a marching band. So this really puts them on a level playing field with everybody else. It gives them a sense of self-pride and confidence."

"When people see us perform, they're amazed," says Sam Shepherd, a junior who plays trombone. "They're very proud of how hard we work. It's keeping me very busy throughout the year. I'm keeping in shape by being on the track team because the Rose

Parade is six miles long. The best thing is interacting with other band members. The hardest thing? Trying to keep my head still when I'm marching."

"It's given Sam more of an upbeat attitude," says his mother, Paula Shepherd. "Absolutely. He greatly values his participation in extracurriculars. It's a very good motivator to keep his grades up and stay on the straight and narrow. When people see the band for the first time, it brings them to tears. It also forces them to not knee-jerk react and say, 'Oh, a blind person can't do this.' It's also good for the marching assistants, especially the teenagers. They tend to be pretty self-centered, and the band causes them to be grateful for their own good health and sound eyes. This experience should instill a lifelong service commitment."

Misty Hatcher, a senior who plays trumpet, admits the best thing is "getting to be famous! And I don't want to let the rest of my friends down. It shows we can be sort of role models." Adds her mother, Annette Lutz, "Misty is very outgoing, so she just loves the whole thing. She says, 'We're like celebrities!' She's always had trouble not sticking to activities, but she really has given this 110 percent."

The cost of the trip to the Tournament of Roses Parade was estimated at \$115,000, covering new summer uniforms and expenses for band directors, members and marching assistants. Of that, the Lions pledged to raise \$80,000. A parent teacher-student organization at the school also raised money. (As a state agency, the school itself cannot ask for donations.) One club involved was Millersport Lions, which held an "Easter Bunny" breakfast and a district-wide spaghetti dinner and silent auction in April and set up a game booth at the annual Millersport Sweet Corn Festival in September.

Mazzoli was prominently involved in the fundraising efforts. "The school and the Lions have been working together for at least the



The stars of the game congratulate the stars of halftime.



The discipline and hard work builds self-esteem, says band members and parents.

last 15 years," he says. "The Lions held district meetings at the school. When they heard the band was invited to the parade, it was a natural relationship. The Lion Foundation is a special fund that was set up to support the trip, with clubs throughout the state doing different projects."

"I went to our governing board in the state, and requested that a subcommittee be set up to raise dollars to help the band," says Ron Robbins, a member of the Dublin Lions Club in the Greater Columbus area and past district governor for District 13-F. "From that, we formed the Ohio Lion Foundation. I think this will certainly give clubs an opportunity in the future to assist the band. Maybe the kids will need five grand for instruments or whatever. So I see this definitely as an ongoing opportunity."

"The Lions' support has been wonderful," says Agler. "The majority of our kids come from very poor families.

We simply couldn't have done it without the Lions." Adds Kelley, "The Lions certainly have done a lot to support us. They do a lot of work across the boards. When I was playing Beep Baseball [for the blind and visually impaired], the Lions around here would do a lot to help us out."

Kelley conducts by focusing on the band's drummers. "Two of them can see well enough so they can catch my tempo," he says. "But I really don't do a lot of conducting visually. I work on that stuff in rehearsals. Then pretty much all I have to do on the field is get them started, tell them what's coming up next."

When Kelley directs, he uses a computer program on his laptop called LIME, which allows him to play each part individually or play them altogether. He hooks up the computer to a Yamaha keyboard, so the youngsters can hear it. The musicians learn the music by using another

computer program, SmartMusic. The score is entered into FINALE, from which SmartMusic files are created. (FINALE is a music production software suite that allows one to produce a score in an electronic format.) The students can listen to their parts—the flute, the trumpet, whatever—or the entire band's, slowing down the tempo as much as they want. They can also select sections to listen to over and over.

Aglar says SmartMusic allows them to learn three times the amount of music in one week that it used to take three months to learn.

The parade opportunity happened when the Tournament of Roses was looking for unique marching bands and found the Ohio ensemble via

Google. The band submitted a video, and a Tournament representative told Aglar, "I can't promise you'll be in it, but we're curious to see what you do and how good you guys are." They'd never had a blind marching band. "They'd never even *heard* of one," Aglar says, laughing. "The kids really rose to the occasion. I honestly thought, 'How can they *not* choose us?'"

When they were selected, Aglar was initially sworn to secrecy. Later, she arranged for an all-school assembly in the gym, allegedly to get everyone to sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" for a national certification project. "I had my cell phone hooked up to the sound system. It rang and everyone could hear the Tournament of Roses president saying, 'I'm calling to congratulate you for being accepted to march in the 2010 Tournament of Roses Parade.' Well, the band members jumped to their feet, yelling and screaming. There were a lot of tears as well as cheers. It was fantastic.

"The band is important for our school, because of the school spirit it inspires, because of the unifying factor. There's *nothing* like the power of a marching band—even a small marching band. Beyond that, it has expanded our blind and visually impaired students' worlds. It has brought them to communities where they never would have been be-

fore. They have learned to negotiate all sorts of new settings and new people. They're constantly with different marching assistants, they're learning social skills, they're learning to work together. They're also learning to tie their shoes tightly, and they're learning how to hang up band uniforms—which is a *real* challenge. They've got to learn to be organized, to put their things away so they can find them the next time.

To keep all their stuff together, and not get mixed up with somebody else's so don't have somebody else's shoes on."

"There's a lot to be gained from this," notes Kelley. "It's not just playing music and marching. These kids are going to learn a lot of learning life skills doing this activ-

ity—team building, working with other people, self-discipline and time commitment, things like that. Things that they need to know to be successful when they get out of here. That's my big-picture thinking: Laying down some foundations for later on. That being said, there's a lot of responsibility on Carol and me and the kids to put a product out there that's sharp, looks crisp and sounds good."

"It's influenced me because if you want to want to get something out of what you like to do, then you have to work for it," says Macy McClain, a recent graduate who plays flute and piccolo.

"We want to be the best we can, and seeing that we're blind, it puts more pressure on us to do good. Because a lot of people have a bad conception about blindness. So this is a way of changing their attitudes."

One thing doesn't change: the band plays the university's signature song. Kelley explains: "We spell out 'Ohio' in Braille. Everybody comes out from the sidelines, turns out into lines and individually starts coming across. You have players in positions for the dots representing each Braille letter, like 3 for the H and 2 for the I." Then, emulating their Ohio State counterparts, the tuba player marches over and, bowing, "dots" the i. The crowd roars. ■



Band members cried when they discovered they were headed to the Roses Parade.

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