

Opinion

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: Banging the drum for music at Upper Darby

Sunday, April 28, 2013

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It was just about this time last year that all hell was breaking loose in the Upper Darby School District. Now we know why.

As usual, the school district was swimming in red ink. The balance sheet was only slightly off — \$13 million to be exact.

Tough decisions had to be made. Jobs would be cut. Curriculums would be juggled. Priorities would be adjusted.

The administration knew the proposal would not be well-received. They weren't wrong about that. People went ballistic.

Sure, they didn't like to see anyone lose their job, and they had started to come to grips with the idea that the district was being forced to "teach to the test" under the strain of meeting state and federal guidelines. What they could not stomach was what they believed to be a death knell for the district's calling card — its beloved music programs.

The district was proposing drastic cuts in the elementary music programs. Language arts and library also would be sliced.

Parents were mortified. Let's just say the plan was not music to their hearts. Instead of singing the blues, they did something else. They mobilized. They packed school board meetings. They created a Facebook page, Save Upper Darby Arts. They were loud. And proud. And they would not go away.

They invoked the name of beloved late district music teacher Brad Schoener, insisting he would be rolling over in his grave at the thought of cutting music education.

In a district where more than 75 languages are spoken, they considered music more than the "universal language." It was Upper Darby's calling card. A school district that produced people like Todd Rundgren and Tina Fey should not be cutting music and the arts, they intoned at meeting after meeting.

Eventually their voices were heard. More money was found in Harrisburg. The programs were saved. It was music to their ears.

So was this. Last weekend the Upper Darby High School Indoor Drumline won the national championship held in Ohio.

That's correct, this was not a District One title. Not state or regionals. This was the national championship.

Under the direction of Jason Majerczak, the Marching Royals were declared royalty.

I first learned the news in an email from a reader on Saturday afternoon. The woman was intrigued about our story the week

before on Delco's "best and brightest," our All-Delco Hi-Q team.

"Perhaps you'd be interested in some of UDHS's best and brightest, and most talented."

She was right. It was at the Partners in Learning Celebration Dinner honoring the 2013 winners of the All-Delco Hi-Q team as well as the Excellence in Teaching Awards where I once again opined about the daily struggle I wage to make sure we are not giving readers a skewed vision of young people.

Let's face it, the only time many of them make the newspaper is when they do something wrong.

I was thinking of that when I assigned a reporter to track down the details on the championship won by Upper Darby Drumline. That and something else. I was not a band kid. I played sports when I was in school. All I know is that every one of those hot summer nights when we would be practicing, I would look across the field and see the marching band doing the same thing.

At Upper Darby High, a school of hard knocks if there ever was one, music is an oasis for a lot of these students. They start early, in the elementary grades. From what I am told, drumline is not an easy task. It takes an incredible amount of practice and musical training. It helps when it is nurtured by a staff that lovingly tends those talents.

Today the Upper Darby drumline team is a national champion. It didn't start yesterday. Or the weeks or months preceding. These seeds were planted years ago, only to come to fruition as champions. But what about tomorrow?

That's the other thing I was feeling, the gnawing knot in my gut that tells me Upper Darby is not out of the woods yet when it comes to economic peril.

After last year's controversial budget plan, this year the district this year tried a new tact, bringing in the Penn Center for Civic Engagement to run a series of public meetings to get taxpayers more involved in the budget process.

Guess what? The numbers still don't add up.

That obviously was on the mind of the woman who tipped me off to Upper Darby's big win.

"Yes, first place in the nation," she said, "from a district that may not see performances like this in the near future due to the cuts in elementary music that provided the fundamentals to the students who go on to perform at this level."

A huge crowd of parents, students, and well-wishers turned out to greet the drumline team as they arrived back at the high school last Sunday night as national champions.

My guess is that many of them will gather once again in a few weeks, pleading with the school board to spare their musical program.

At Notre Dame, when the football team takes the field, each player taps a sign as the exit the locker room that proclaims, "Play like a champion today."

The Upper Darby Drumline knows that feeling. I hope nothing happens to change that.

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