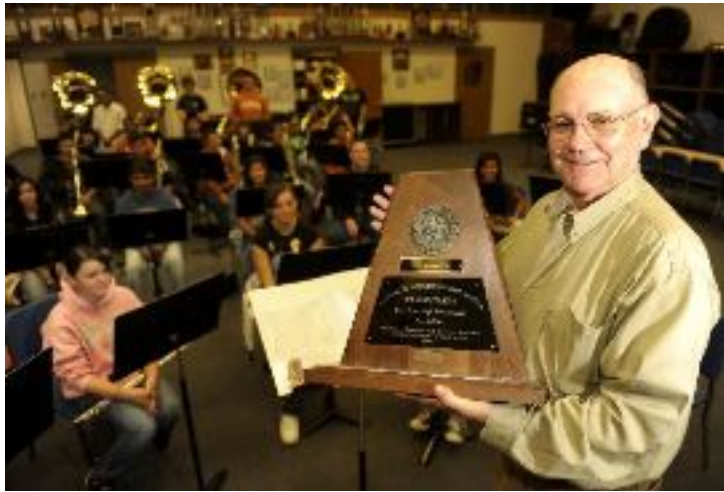


Hitting a high note

Band director guides students to do more in life

By Brenda Bernet

brenda.bernet@amarillo.com



Stephen Spillman / Amarillo Globe-News

Palo Duro High School band director Jeff Doughten stands in front of the marching band with its eighth consecutive University Interscholastic League Sweepstakes award. Sweepstakes is awarded to bands earning a 1 in marching, 1 in concert and 1 in sight reading.



They leave every rehearsal the same way: standing behind their chairs with each music stand pushed to the base. Upperclassmen say, "Northside;" freshmen say, "Pride."

Palo Duro High School band director Jeff Doughten sends them off to their next class at the door. "Have a good day," he tells them.

Doughten has directed high school bands for 46 years, with the past 10 years spent at Palo Duro, a school of about 1,800 students.

"When Jeff got there, they began an upward trajectory and a very swift one," said Gary Garner, who directed the West Texas A&M University band for 39 years and now is retired. Doughten was a senior at the school when Garner became the director at WT. "He is an unusual combination of ability and determination and an absolutely relentless desire to excel. It's all for the right reasons."

Band isn't just about learning to play music and march in a diagonal line. Doughten, 67, wants his students to do much more - not just with their marches, but their lives.

"We do what we got to do," said 17-year-old George Gonzalez, a senior tuba player. "He wants the best for us. He always says it. He gets on to us."

But they can take it, because they know he cares, said Ivette Bravo, a senior who served as a drum major this year.

"If someone's failing, he would talk to that person," the 17-year-old flute player said. "He even says that grades are more important."

Doughten brought discipline and order to the band his first year, many of whom come from low-income families. Andrea Noel, who was a freshman flute player then, remembers the objections of the senior class, but his methods got results. In just his second year, the band won the first of eight consecutive Sweepstakes awards under Doughten. Noel said the bus shook with the jubilation of students after that first win.

Noel saw the genuine care Doughten had for his students and the effect he had on their lives. She soon will graduate from college and has returned to Palo Duro as a student band teacher this year.

"My life is a direct result from what I received as a member of this band," Noel said. "He just wants you to be a better you."

The band of 45 members earned its 11th consecutive first division rating at the University Interscholastic League Region I Marching Contest on Saturday at Dick Bivins Stadium. He hopes to add a ninth consecutive sweepstakes award, given for each year a band earns the top rating at UIL marching, concert performance and sight-reading contests.

"Nothing in this life that is worthwhile is easy," Doughten said. "You have to earn it."

And Doughten has taken his students all over the country to give concerts, including the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the USS Missouri at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. This trip this year to California will cost \$925 per student, and Doughten's students will raise every penny from their part-time jobs at supermarkets and restaurants and through fundraisers, including an upcoming sale of poinsettias.

"I want the kids to win," said Doughten, who emphasizes the freedoms students enjoy because of the sacrifices of those who served in the military. "I want them to win sweepstakes. Winning sets the tone for them to go play on the USS Missouri."

The band is scheduled to perform on the USS Midway, a flattop ship from World War II, in San Diego and then head to Los Angeles to perform at Disneyland. The students will have time to play at the amusement park, and the itinerary includes excursions to Universal Studios and the La Brea tar pits.

"This is not about me," he said. "Give them the credit."

Doughten said he wants his students to have confidence they can achieve. They might lose, but they are never losers. Several years ago, Doughten decided he would not take the band to an area marching contest, a decision that drew criticism. The last year the band went to an area competition, the students came back in tears, upset that they had not achieved another success for their director.

"I don't want to put these kids in a situation where they may not be successful," he said. "They have enough of that."