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Music of the highlands
Area junior pipe band keeps Scottish traditions alive

By John Santana
Mill Creek Enterprise editor

Kevin Auld circles the main band room at Shorecrest High School with the attentiveness of a dedicated inspector.

To a neophyte ear, the music emanating from his circle of youth bagpipe players sounds perfect; they resonate like a united force.

But Auld stops them during their run-through. He's detected a flaw in the performance that only a trained ear can detect. He provides his students with patient, yet firm instruction on getting the tune right.

It's a Thursday night and the Northwest Junior Pipe Band has convened at the Shoreline high school for its weekly practice session. In various rooms used by the school's music department are children and teenagers working closely with adult instructors, pouring over sheet music of traditional Scottish songs. There's a seriousness, a sort of unspoken professional pride as everyone rehearses their parts for the upcoming summer of performances.

"We have to know not just the snare (drum) music, but all the band's music," said Mill Creek-area resident Marcie MacRae, who teaches bass drum to Shorecrest High student Bobby Hines, who she describes as being "a natural" on the bass drum.

Despite the seriousness, members enjoy being in the program.

"I was playing another instrument, the flute, and I was getting bored with it," said Marie Salmi of Lake Forest Park, who plays bagpipes in the band. "I find this is more relaxing. Flute players get pretty competitive."

The Northwest Junior Pipe band has 21 members aged 9 to 18 from throughout the King and Snohomish County areas, said Charles Simontacchi of Mill Creek, the band's president and father of twin daughters, Christine and Alexis, who both play in the band.

The current figure is a long way from when Charles Simontacchi first got involved with the program two years ago.

"The membership had dwindled to just a



Enterprise/CHRIS GOODENOW
Members of the Northwest Junior Pipe Band, from left, Christine Simontacchi, 17, of Mill Creek, Marie Salmi, 18, Chandra Lefevre, 17, both of Lake Forest Park, and Alexander Schiele (foreground), 9, of Monroe, practice their bagpipes Feb. 17 in the Shorecrest High School music room where they practice every week. Shorecrest's mascot, a Scot, is in the background.

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Enterprise/CHRIS GOODENOW
Northwest Junior Pipe Band drummers rehearse a piece during their weekly practice at Shorecrest High School. Pictured, clockwise, from far left, are bass drummer Bobby Hines, 17, of Bothell, bass instructor Marcie MacRae, drumming instructor Steve Campbell of Seattle, and snare drummers Alexis Simontacchi, 17, of Mill Creek, and Morgan Schiele, 11, of Snohomish.

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More band info

A proper tartan kilt and accessories aren't cheap.

The cost of a single tartan kilt, according to a Northwest Junior Pipe Band brochure, is \$500. A full band uniform costs approximately \$1,000.

That's why the band, a nonprofit

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handful of members," he said. "We didn't compete (as a team) because we didn't have enough members to put on the field. Instead, we competed individually."

Thanks in part to the efforts of the instructors, who conducted recruitment drives, the band was able to begin competing as a team at various highland games events through the northwest.

"I first saw them at the highland games, and my dad got me into it," said 11-year-old Julia Raymond of Lynnwood, who plays tenor drum and has been in the program for about 18 months.

Members also recruited their friends to the band.

That's how Salmi got involved. She was brought into the program by Chandra Lefevre, her friend, fellow Shorecrest student, and now, fellow bagpipe player.

"They took me to practice," Salmi said about Lefevre.

This year the band has an ambitious schedule that will take it to Portland for the Oregon Pipers Society event on March 19 and highland games events in Enumclaw, Mount Vernon and British Columbia. Some members will even make an afternoon appearance at Cedar Wood Elementary School in Mill Creek on St. Patrick's Day, March 17.

But the program is more than just music. Members perform in uniform, right down to wearing traditional tartan kilts. Several members and coaches take part because they have Scottish heritage, like Auld and Shoreline's Sean Felker, a beginning drummer whose brother Matthew is also in the band.

For Raymond, the band also gives her a chance to show off a bit during performances. While keeping the beat, she and her fellow tenor drummer, her cousin Melani Winsor, get to "flourish," where they twirl their fuzzy-capped drum sticks with their wrists.

"That's really fun," Raymond said.

organization, is always seeking donations to help defray expenses of outfitting a member or buying instruments or related equipment, such as bagpipe chanter reeds.

New members are also welcome, and no previous musical experience is required. Instruction is provided in technique and reading music. The band is also available to perform at a variety of functions.

For more information on donating or joining the band, call Charles Simontacchi at 425-338-1894.

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