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Local Opinion

Web posted Monday, September 23, 2002

Megathlin: Learning a lot about people, life and all that jazz

By Carol Megathlin

For the Savannah Morning News



"Hey, you're not on vacation here!" Director Michael Hutchinson's voice is soft, and although he was standing a few feet away from the big yellow school bus, every member of the Skyelite Jazz Band inside heard him. The talking and laughing stopped immediately -- and the teen-agers stayed quiet while he and I finished our conversation.

In case you don't know, members of the Skyelite Jazz Band are students at the Savannah Arts Academy, the performing and visual arts magnet school in the Savannah-Chatham County school system.

How this group of young people came to be on the Skidaway Institute of Oceanography campus last Saturday, with a tropical storm bearing down on us, is a miracle -- if you've ever planned an outdoor party for, oh, several hundred to a thousand people during hurricane season.

Six weeks before our Sept. 14 open house at Skidaway, I had lined up the Crabettes to sing at 3 p.m. and the Savannah Symphony to perform at 5. But we needed a brass band for 1 p.m., something upbeat to start off the afternoon. A friend suggested the Skyelite Band. "They'll be hard to get," another friend warned. "A weekend gig is an imposition on the students as well as their families."

I launched an intensive campaign, bombarding Director Michael Hutchinson and Savannah Arts Academy principal Marcia Clanton with offers I hoped they couldn't resist: free lunch for the band, a free T-shirt for every musician, a bunting-draped portable stage, and complimentary use of the symphony's sound system. With 10 days left before the open house, Director Hutchinson left the message I had been praying for: "The principal has approved our appearance at Skidaway." I could hear the smile in his voice.

Then, three days before the open house, Tropical Storm Hannah reared her thundering head in the Gulf. On the Friday night before the open house on Saturday, Hannah scared off the Symphony. Ten minutes later, Chatham County Parks and Recreation called to

Events:

January

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veto our use of their portable stage -- rain was too likely. Even the unsinkable Crabettes bowed to the prediction of an 80 percent chance of a downpour. Would the Skyelite Jazz Band abandon me, too?

Late Friday night, I sent a frantic e-mail to Michael Hutchinson. Would they show up? He called me at 7 a.m. the next morning. "Of course we will be there," he said. "I told the kids that we will go, and if we can't play, we will look around campus and see what's going on there."

Skidaway Institute's shop crew set up our tent, rare electricity to it, and by 11 a.m., had prepared a place for the Skyelites to perform. Just as the sun broke through the clouds, the school bus lumbered onto campus. More than 20 students disembarked and went to work. They set up their own sound system, prepared their instruments, then walked to the library auditorium to be served lunch. "We work before we eat," Mr. Hutchinson said.

The students all thanked me as they picked up their sandwiches. They talked quietly as they ate. I listened covertly to the interaction between the teen-agers and their teacher/director. His charges obviously held both respect and affection for him. How had this man learned to communicate both sternness and caring in one sentence? To walk with such ease along the narrow path where goodwill and authority overlap?

The concert began at 1 p.m., right on schedule. After it was over the students struggled to drag their instruments, sound equipment, and boxy wooden music stands up the narrow steps of the school bus. Michael Hutchinson sat beside me under a mossy oak, watching them.

"We need a truck," he said with a sigh, resting his elbows on his knees, "to carry the sound equipment and the instruments. But there's no money for things like that."

I apologized for the awful weather forecasts, although the sun shone most of the afternoon, and for the resultant sparse attendance. It was all right, he said. His band needed the practice of setting up and playing for an audience.

He stood up to board the bus. "Besides," he said, turning to look directly into my eyes, "I believe everything happens for a reason."

Clouds covered the sun as I brooded over the months of planning, the hard work and money expended by the Institute for this day. I realized I was absentmindedly watching the school bus as it pulled away from campus. Full of teen-agers. On a Saturday.

Michael Hutchinson is teaching more than music, to more people than he knows.

Carol Megathlin is a free-lance writer living in Savannah.

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