

# “It’s Just Band”

Amanda Blackstone



How many of us have been vexed by the saying, “It’s Just Band”? Maybe we’ve heard it uttered by an overcommitted student who is trying to quit band to focus on other things. Maybe we’ve heard it from an administrator who just doesn’t seem to understand what we need or why we need it. Maybe we’ve even heard it from a friend or loved one who simply wants to talk about something else at dinner that night. Though it’s not meant to offend, for many of us that little saying can carry a lot of weight.

I once heard a region band clinician say to the audience, “Band saved me. Band saved my life.” and it struck me. As band directors, we will never see band as just a class or hobby. We are teaching band because our lives have been permanently impacted by our experiences in band. There is no doubt that band directors in the great state of Texas are smart and capable enough to do a multitude of higher paid jobs out in the world. In fact, several of the “greats” in our profession today say that they seriously considered another career path such as engineering or law. Yet the innate purpose of impacting the next generation through hard work and musical expression has ultimately set us on this rewarding journey: band directing.

Did band save you? When I was in fifth grade, I really struggled in school. My teachers didn’t like me, mostly because I talked a lot and, even though I was a bright student, I didn’t do well with sitting and taking notes. Looking back, I probably would have been

much better off if I had just worn my glasses, but I didn’t want to be called *Four Eyes* so I meandered through my fifth grade year without being able to see the board or overhead projector. I was often in trouble and eventually hated going to school. My parents struggled to get me out the door each day and I had several absences. After a particularly tumultuous morning, my nicest teacher, Mrs. Turner, brushed my hair in the middle of class because it was so messy that day. I will never forget that small act of kindness in a year of being severely misunderstood.

When I qualified for the middle school gifted and talented program, my fifth grade teachers would not recommend me so I was held back in the “regular classes”. Knowing this, it looked like middle school wasn’t going to be much better for me, my self esteem sinking lower and lower. Then, there was beginner band class. I loved playing the flute, loved being first chair, and took great pride in the hard work and accomplishments that I achieved each day with my band directors. They saw potential in me and helped me to understand that I was a good student. In fact, anyone could be a good student, if they tried their hardest. By seventh grade, I was the pre-AP student in the front row of the flute section with glasses and straight As on my report card. I loved school again and, in that way, I would say that band saved me. If you have a story like mine, it may be hard to hear a reminder that many people see band as just another elective or extracurricular activity.

Though there are many different personalities represented in our profession, it’s safe to say that we all work really hard. Always pushing for the best experience on behalf of our students, always pushing them to their highest potential, and always putting in the hours it takes to achieve our goals. With the pressures of a “normal” school year approaching, it’s so easy to get caught up in the rat race of Texas band. We remember what band was like before the pandemic and we just want it to snap back into place. But the reality is that some band programs may not have been severely impacted by the pandemic, while others are being totally rebuilt from the ground up. Just like each individual has experienced Covid-19 differently, the same can be said for band programs across the state.

So what if we embraced an “It’s Just Band” mindset? By that, I mean what if we took ourselves a little less seriously? Some may call it giving yourself grace, but I like to think about it as simplification. With Covid-19, the situation in Ukraine, and countless other topics being spread across news headlines, the world is a scary place right now. Our students are not oblivious to this, even in sixth grade! Maybe your band program doesn’t need to be the very best this year. What if all we need is to be a safe space for our students to make music and have fun? The angel on my shoulder wants me to believe that approach will actually bring more rewards. Then, the other shoulder

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says that I will only be successful if I push for everything that everyone else is trying to accomplish. Which one is right? Honestly I don’t think many people would’ve called my middle school band “successful”. We weren’t selected as a TMEA Honor Band; we didn’t have a private lesson program; our performances certainly weren’t flawless. Nonetheless, several of my classmates from that band are music educators now. Something special happened in that band hall, just like many others all across the state.

When everything shut down two years ago, we all got a taste of what life would be like without band and we didn’t like it. But who says we shouldn’t allow that experience to shape our future? It will look different in every band hall, but it may be time to say “It’s Just Band”. When you feel

tension building in your shoulders or a rehearsal doesn’t go as well as you expected, remind yourself that “It’s Just Band”. Don’t give up, keep working hard and believe in your students, but remember that this is music and it’s meant to be enjoyed.

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