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Nearly half the 800 students at DeMatha Catholic High School are involved in the music program.

DeMatha music program rivals basketball team in national prominence

DeMatha Catholic High School first gained national attention in 1965 when its basketball squad knocked off Power Memorial Academy and Lew Alcindor (now Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) in what was called "The Greatest High School Basketball Game Ever." Morgan Wootten's teams compiled an outstanding 1,274-192 record over 46 seasons, won five national championships and sent hundreds of players to the next level, including Hall of Famer Adrian Dantley, Duke All-American Danny Ferry and Derek Whittenburg and Sidney Lowe, who led NC State to the 1983 NCAA title.

The Prince George's County all-boys school has built a national reputation in another curriculum. The DeMatha music program began in 1970 with 19 students. Now nearly 50 percent of the 800 students take part in the program, which has received local, national and international recognition.

"Here's an amazing story," said DeMatha principal Dan McMahon. "Then-principal John Moylan decided the school needed a band program and he hired a guy. The first day of school, the guy calls and said he was in the Army Reserves and just got called up and could not teach. So he calls the University of Maryland to see if they might have a grad student who would be willing to do it. John Mitchell stayed 40 years."

For 36 of the 46 years that the school's music program has existed, McMahon has been at DeMatha, first as a student (1972-73 through 1975-76) then as a teacher (1982-83 through 1996-97) and since 2000 as principal. He witnessed the growth first-hand. Now, the music department includes five full-time teachers, five concert bands, three choruses, three percussion ensembles and three string orchestras. The program also includes a pep band for basketball games.

"They play 'Sweet Caroline' at basketball games during timeouts," added McMahon. "One of my favorite stories happened when (rival) Gonzaga visited. They had 300 kids in the building and we had 400. The band starts playing the song and when it gets to the "Ba ba ba" there were 700 kids pumping their fists and singing together. It was one of those great moments. Sure, the game matters but what was really cool was to see kids from both schools singing along."

Last September, the DeMatha wind ensemble was asked to perform for the assembled crowd at Andrews Air Force Base when Pope Francis arrived in the United States. The band played tunes like "Louie, Louie" and "Happy" to the crowd of nearly 500.

"For a two-hour period, we were the most trending topic on Twitter because the plane was late," McMahon said. "The reporters didn't have anyone to talk to so they started interviewing our kids. Every newspaper and media outlet there interviewed them about what it meant to be playing at this historic event. They had a great time."

Currently eight members of the chorus are All-State. Since 1974, more than 500 band members have been named All-State, the most of any private school in Maryland. The National Catholic Bandmaster's Association at Duquesne University named the wind ensemble the top Catholic High School band 18 times during a 20-year period.

"After we had been in it 20 years and won 18 times, they asked us to retire from this particular award," McMahon said. "But we still compete in festivals around the country each year. We have kids who have received scholarships to some of the top music conservatories in the country: Eastman, Julliard, Peabody. One of our current students, Michael Butler, wants to be an opera singer and is amazing. At our Founder's Day Mass, he sang a solo that the kids spontaneously stood and cheered. They knew they were in the presence of genius."

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