

Banding with a **vision** and **purpose**



Since creating The Nebraska Brass Band in 2017, I'm often asked what the band's secret is regarding its success thus far. No doubt, it's a big question to answer due to the many factors involved. With the creation of any entity, it begins with a vision and purpose.

Purpose

Brass banding has been in my life as far back as I can remember. That's in thanks partly to the local Salvation Army in North Yorkshire where I grew up. While I chose a law enforcement career path instead, music continued to be an enjoyable form of relaxation up until my departure to America in 2000.

For the next 17 years, I still managed to play in several great bands until we moved the family to Omaha, Nebraska where brass banding was essentially non-existent. New jobs, new schools for our children and a new way of life to learn... what better timing to start a brass band! In all seriousness, it was great timing and a wonderful opportunity to meet new people and start building the band's network. Omaha is rich in the performing arts and after setting up meetings with key people (university professors, local amateur music directors, venue managers and members of Omaha Symphony) it became clear that forming a brass band would be of particular interest in this community. Collecting a total of 96 possible musicians from these contacts proved invaluable, not to mention forming new relationships with groups that would later become fruitful to the band.

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When Yorkshireman Glenn Greet arrived in Omaha, Nebraska in 2016, there wasn't a single British-style brass band in the area. So how did he end up creating a 34-piece band that in the space of two years now plays to sell-out crowds?

Planning

Over the next three weeks, my wife and I made individual and personal contact with over 70 prospective musicians. Coffees, lunches, and many more hours on the phone proved successful. It is remarkable to think back to that time, but by the end of that effort, we had a brass band of 34 permanent members. Of those members, new resources became available: a rehearsal venue, warm leads with foundations/donors, contacts for potential collaborations, access to government officials, and names of possible business sponsors. Over the next two months, all these individuals were contacted and once again new relationships formed to the tune of \$25,000 in pledged support, four concerts confirmed for the inaugural season, and a newly formed board of directors from the business community. We clearly curbed the curiosity of the people of Nebraska and used the niche and fascination of something 'British' to our advantage.

Patience

One of the biggest achievements with this venture, I believe, was bringing 34 high-calibre musicians together from all walks of life, the majority of whom had no real brass band experience. Playing in treble clef, transposing and coming away from the norms of orchestral playing were all challenges and we faced them head on. I'm thankful to this day for the section leaders I have who are true professionals in their own right, including Dr. Dan Thrower (Principal Cornet and an active US Military musician), Dr. Robert Benton (Principal Euphonium and Professor of Low Brass at the University of Nebraska, Kearney) and Paul Niedbalski (Principal Trombone, music educator and substitute for Omaha Symphony). This support was critical to the development of working on blend, balance, and our overall musical product and image. Those first few months of rehearsals were almost a step back for many, but everyone gave it a chance and their best effort, and the results started to pay off quickly.

Performance

The inaugural concert in October of 2017 went down as a huge success. It was nothing too complicated and easy on the ears for a new audience, whilst also showcasing the various talents within the group. Of note was Torgny Hanson's arrangement of *Folk Dances* by Shostakovich, Robert Benton's euphonium solo *Benedictus* from Karl Jenkins's *A Mass for Peace*, and a wonderful arrangement of *Bring Him Home*, featuring vocal soloist Drew Duncan with Opera Omaha.

The remaining concerts throughout the season all became collaborative projects with choirs, local churches and charities, as well as other musical ensembles, all of which were sell-out events. The band started to gain its reputation across Nebraska and further collaboration requests from other organisations soon came to us, such as participation in the Glenn Miller National Music Festival, performing the National Anthem at the Nebraska State Capitol, as well as winning the contest for performing the National Anthem at the 2018 Cornhusker State Games. Partnerships with Fox News at Christmas gave ensembles from the band opportunities to visit local schools to provide musical enjoyment to students and staff whose classrooms we disrupted. Requests to perform at military funerals, our work with the Veteran's Hospital, and US Naval Sea Cadets all have been meaningful partnerships to all our members.

The repertoire has since stepped up in this current season and includes Eric Ball's *Clear Skies* and *The Kingdom Triumphant*, Derek Bourgeois's *Trombone Concerto*, Philip Harper's arrangement of Harry

Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, and Lewis Buckley's *Carnival of Venice*. Because building our local audience base is currently our top priority, entering into NABBA competitions has been put on hold for now, but we plan and look forward to including this in future seasons and look forward to networking with other brass bands across America. I do want extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Joel Collier from NABBA for his support in starting the band - he is truly a wonderful person and a great resource for any brass band (new or old).

In Point

The stability of The Nebraska Brass Band is not down to just one person - it took many different people helping along the way. I do want to mention here the massive appreciation I have for my wife for the countless hours she has given in her capacity as Band Manager, Board of Directors, 2nd baritone player, and sounding board supervisor to what I can only imagine as a difficult spouse at time. Thank you Laura!

The band (including myself) receive no payment for our time or talents. As with most brass bands, we do it out of enjoyment of belonging to a group that is bigger than ourselves. To witness the appreciation of diverse audiences showing their gratitude for the band's hard work makes going home at the end of a rehearsal or performance just that little bit more worth it.

I'm often told I must be crazy creating something that is out of the box, and my reply is often "thank you". I'm not one for a boring life and

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belonging to the world of brass banding for a good part of 30 years has been a wonderful journey to date. I'm certainly looking forward to what the future brings.

I must also mention how amazed I am at the brass band global network. Most people I have contacted (many whom I have had little to no real connection with in person) not only answered my messages, but offered valuable guidance and resources. I believe that's in part due to most people understanding that brass banding is driven not by individuals, but by communities of people. I don't believe there is a better network of musicians than that which the brass band network has achieved over the past century or so.

To those who are discouraged in their current band, or to those who are thinking about starting a new group, just remember that you are not alone - all you have to do is ask for help. Not everyone will respond, some may even be negative, but almost always you will find a few gems who will turn into great resources for you and your band. One thing I have tried to do for other bands is to create all our efforts we undertook as templates for others (especially in marketing strategies, PR, policies, structures, forms etc.), all of which are copyright free and sent to any colleague who asks for help. People gave me the time when I asked for it, it's only fair to do the same for others.

Best wishes to you all as we keep on keeping on.

Video: Joyful, Joyful (arr. Len Ballantine)

*Video: Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
John Williams (arr. Philip Harper)*



Whether it be in rehearsal or concert, it's an honour to play with such a fine group of musicians.

*Dr. Chris Erickson, Bass Trombone
Medical Director, Omaha Children's Hospital*



As a professional tubist, I play in a lot of different ensembles: orchestras, quintets, concert bands, but the really special thing about brass banding is the camaraderie. The spirit of community sets the brass band apart from any other musical endeavour I've pursued. And it's such a glorious sound to boot!

*Dr. Joshua Calkin, Eb Bass – Professor of Music,
Wayne State College, pictured with Dr. Robert Benton
(Principal Euphonium)*



I've found brass banding to be truly challenging and rewarding, more so than other community groups of which I've been a member. It's given me the opportunity to push myself as a musician in ways I don't get to in orchestral playing or in wind bands.

James Lund, Soprano Cornet – Software Engineer

Melodic range and pure power – those two elements characterise the sound of The Nebraska Brass Band.

The Kearney Hub newspaper

