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Brooklyn Center High School's
Chris Porter
Creating a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
of a great music program

The NAMM Foundation's Best
Communities for Music Education

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UPCLOSE

CHRISTINE PORTER

Creating a **Self-Fulfilling Prophecy** of a **Great Music Program**

BY ELIAHU SUSSMAN

Children's books are full of stories where by believing in something fantastic, it can be brought to life and become reality. Chris Porter's music program in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota isn't any different. Armed with some marketing savvy, a few contacts at a local music store, and a steely determination to provide outstanding musical opportunities for kids in this gritty, low income suburb of Minneapolis, Porter has transformed the nearly defunct Brooklyn Center High School band program into a bustling department worthy of local, state, and national recognition.





**“This program was
built by marketing.”**

Recently, the Brooklyn Center School District became a full-service Community School. Brooklyn Center provides free or low cost health care, dental care, and mental health care for all children in our school, district, and community. Brooklyn Center High School received federal funding in the form of a grant to enhance existing programs, and provide academic rigor through a combination of curriculum focuses centered in the Inter-

national Baccalaureate Middle Years Programme, and a multi-dimensional Arts Magnet Program.

Brooklyn Center High School has received the Magnet School of Excellence Award for the past three years in a row, in part because of the exceptional musical opportunities it offers its students, as evidenced by the fact that 327 of the 738 students participate in the music program. This is a far cry from the 24 kids who were

enrolled in band when Chris came on board a decade ago. The most recent affirmation of her efforts came in May of 2011, when Brooklyn Center HS was singled out by the NAMM Foundation as one of the “Best Communities for Music Education” in America.

To learn more about this remarkable transformation, *SBO* caught up with Chris Porter, who, in this recent interview, talks about creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of a great music program, the steps she took to turn that prophecy into a reality, and the ongoing challenges of maintaining a program in a school that is struggling for survival amidst Statutory Operating Debt.

School Band & Orchestra: How did you end up at Brooklyn Center High School?

Chris Porter: I taught for two years at a school in rural Minnesota, and when I was offered the position at Brooklyn Center High School, I was thrilled to move back to the Twin Cities. When I arrived, I met a program that was on the verge of extinction. A high director turnover rate, massive school budget cuts, and a rising rate of severe economic challenges took its toll on the program. The beginning band program was cut entirely, which resulted in a very low level of participation in the bands and a very low playing level. The principal at the time handed me my keys and said, “Build a band program.” I started out with only 24 kids in the entire program and a few instruments that were older than me.

SBO: So what was the first thing you did to get the ball rolling in the right direction?

CP: I assessed the situation and formulated a plan for bringing kids into the program. I recruited big-time throughout the year within the school, but I knew that I had to start and work from the bottom up to build a strong foundation. In the spring of my first year at BC, I took a few of my senior band members down to the elementary school every day for 90 minutes during my prep and lunch time to implement an exploratory band curriculum that I had developed. I used to work

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at Schmitt Music during high school and college, which, lucky for us, is right down the street from the school. Thankfully, Schmitt Music agreed to let us use a bunch of instruments for free during the exploratory program, so the elementary school kids could try out all of the different instruments and could make an informed decision about what they might want to play. That was the very beginning of how we got the program started.

The very next year, I had 85 seventh graders, which is when we start band in this district, and none of them could afford to rent instruments. Fortunately, Schmitt Music came to the rescue yet again and a band director friend of mine let us borrow some instruments that were not being used at his school, which bought me some time to write grants. I also developed partnerships with the community, including the Rotary Club of Brooklyn Center, which has adopted the band program and has been giving us five to thousand dollars annually. To date, they have donated over \$35,000 to the program.

SBO: How does that compare to the funding you get from the district?

CP: The funding from the district is significantly less than what I've raised. I did this with only the help of my kids, and later, once we were able to add staff, with them, too. We wrote grants, played, and put the word out there. A low property wealth means a greater tax impact on residents of the district. This, in turn, has made funding the district and its programs, dif-

“It’s super rewarding to stand here, take away the barriers, and tell my kids, ‘You’re going to get good at playing music,’ and then watch them do exactly that.”

ficult at times. The effort to pass an operating levy to generate funds for the school has not been successful in recent years – the past eight attempts have failed.

SBO: Were you ever second guessing your decision to come to a school that needed so much work?

CP: I saw the potential in the program. That’s my personality – I’m

always looking to help out the underdog, and I knew there was the potential here; I just had to find the right tools to work with. I never regretted my decision to come here. I love these kids. These are my kids and this is my program.

SBO: Would you talk about how you were able to leverage connections you had made at a local music store?

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Brooklyn Center High School At a Glance



Location: 6500 Humboldt Ave. N.,
Brooklyn Center, Minn.
On the Web: www.bcband.com
Students in School: 738
Students in Instrumental Music: 206
Band Director: Chris Porter

Ensembles

Beginning Band: 60 6th & 7th graders
High School Band: 45 9th – 12th graders
Intermediate Band: 45 students
Electronic Music: 36 students
Jazz Ensemble: 40 students
Orchestra: 16 students
Instrumental Studio: (varies)

Recent Accomplishments

2011 Best Community for Music Education (NAMM Foundation)
2009 Featured on NBC affiliate KARE-11's "What's Cool in School" segment.
2008, 2005 BC Jazz Band featured twice on KBEM Jazz FM's "Inside the Future of Minnesota Jazz."

2006: Honored at the "Grammys on the Hill" event in Washington DC and awarded the Grammy Signature Schools Enterprise Award (\$15,000 donation for new instruments). From 750 applications, only two schools were chosen for this honor.

- ★ Recognized several times in the Congressional Record by representative Betty McCollum and congressman Jim Ramstad.
- ★ Recognized with a Senate Resolution.
- ★ Recognized with a House Resolution
- ★ Recognized by a Mayor's Proclamation.
- ★ A flag was flown over the United States Capitol in honor of the Brooklyn Center High School Band. Congressman Ramstad presented the flag to the band at BCHS, and it now hangs on the wall in the band room.

CP: I worked at Schmitt Music throughout high school and college. It really helped to have those connections. Yamaha also helped out a lot, as well. I studied a lot of marketing in college, and I did an internship with the Yamaha Band & Orchestral Division, and that really opened up a lot of contacts for me, too. It's all about who you know and who you can try to get to help. People do want to help; you just need to find the right people to ask. I called one of my contacts there and said, "Hey, I have all of these marching drums but I'm missing a ton of tension rods, but don't have any money in my budget," and he said, "No problem." and sent me what I needed. I've been very fortunate to be able to use the connections that I've made over the years.

SBO: You're illustrating the importance of marketing in school programs! Speaking of marketing, your school was named one of this year's Best Communities for Music Education. How have you used that to your advantage?

CP: This program was built by marketing. For example, before we

had anything, I went down to the elementary school and sold those kids on the idea we had, hyping it up and presenting how great it was. "Hey, it's

the biggest band in 35 years!" even if we only had 40 kids participating. Or, "Oh wow, we needed two buses instead of one this year – see how great

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of sudden everyone says, “Wow!” The kids start believing it, playing with more heart and practicing harder. Even though the band wasn’t great at first, they were really into it and they had a ton of drive. People saw that, saw how it was growing and really fell in love with the program.

SBO: Where do you see the program down the line – what are your goals?

CP: Right now I’m fighting to keep the program alive. We’re a very low-income district, and our school hasn’t been able to pass a referendum operating levy for the past eight years, so there are cuts and we’re battling. This year, the scheduling isn’t giving me much contact time with my students, actually, hardly any time at all. However, I’m already able to provide an instrument, free of charge, to every single student in the district, in grades six through 12. Every music book, every drumstick, every drop of valve oil – everything is for free and there

that is?” And the Grammy Foundation this, the NAMM Foundation that, it makes everyone really excited to be a part of it. It validates the expense for our sponsors and it’s all another tool we can use. I haven’t had a chance to do much with the BCME award because I’ve been too busy trying to

get my program up and running to really market it yet this year, but the more positive attention you can bring your program, the better. This tool is a prime example of something that I believe in, which is the self-fulfilling prophecy. You tell everyone how great it is, you make it happen, and then all

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is no rental, as long as kids take care of their instruments and respect the greater good. I do always reserve my rights to repossess instruments, as needed! [laughs]

Now, the next step is to try to increase the level of musicianship. The level of musicianship in any program reflects that program's resources. My kids did well, given what we had, but we chose to take it to the next level. I recently had a great student teacher and now have a great colleague with the same vision and mission. We worked literally day and night to see if giving these kids what the affluent school kids got in terms of materials and lessons and personal attention would result in comparable levels of musicianship. And you know what? It did. It totally blew me away. You always hear, "Oh, if we only had this, or if our kids just had that." Well, we gave it to them, and they totally stepped up and recognized their own growth. That is a direction I would love to continue to go in.

SBO: Believe it or not, some people who read this might cringe. Many believe that music and arts

programs should all be funded by the district and that educators shouldn't have to be out there begging and borrowing like you have been. And if your program proves it can be self-sufficient, district funding might never return.

CP: I understand what you're saying, but at the same time, I can't stand on the sidelines and watch things fall apart. In this case, there is no money in the district, for anything, really. I was hired by the district to give our students

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the best possible instrumental music experience, and I will work to do just that. Eventually, that will make the program an important asset in the building and if they cut too much, people will start to get upset. I'm just hoping to weather the budget storm right now, and with a little luck, hopefully it will improve. I guess, just do the best with what you have and the better it gets, the more likely it is to be supported, and hope-

fully funded; however, balancing money from the school and finding money to make ends meet can be extremely frustrating.

SBO: Amidst all of these challenges, what keeps you going as an educator?

CP: It's all about the kids. I get so much satisfaction from seeing them really step up and get involved. I have my kids for six or seven years in a

row. That's a long time to be a part of one person's life. I just so happened to hit the birth lottery better than a lot of these children did. I didn't do anything special for my parents to be able to rent me a trumpet. So for me, it's super rewarding to stand here, take away the barriers, and tell my kids, "You're going to get good at playing music," and then watch them do exactly that.

SBO: Do you have any advice for band directors who are up against the wall fending for themselves?

CP: I don't like to give advice, as every situation is unique; however, the one thing that comes to mind is one of my catch phrases I've used often over the years: "If you don't advocate for and market your program, who will?" That pretty much sums up my belief system when it comes to this. It's not easy to build a program and even with all of the "Forrest Gump-like" successes my program has experienced, it still is no match for the power of outside influences, at times. Case in point, I'm seeing signs of my program literally dying and becoming a victim to scheduling issues. This is above and beyond the usual transient rate of 35 percent for the school population annually. All we can do is hope to weather this most recent storm and, like always, figure out a way for good to prevail. The kids deserve it. It is, however, extremely exhausting protecting the borders of our little self-sufficient nation of BC Band Land and protecting those kids from all of this. They have more than enough to deal with; the least we can do is give them a consistent, positive, musical environment. They need it. We all do, and that's why we all do this. 🎵

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