



Cannon Blast

Classics

EXCELLENCE THROUGH PERSEVERANCE

By Bart Cannon

The Pearl, Miss. High School Marching Band, directed by Ted Burns and my brother, Jeff Cannon, marched past the grandstand during the 2001 Presidential Inauguration and received a thumbs-up from President Bush. Jeff's struggles in getting to Pennsylvania Avenue weren't as widely publicized as our new commander-in-chief's, but they are well documented in my mother's collection of old snapshots and yellowing newspaper clippings. Her archives tell a story reminiscent of the race between the tortoise and the hare.

As a Pearl High student, Jeff adopted band director Porter Burke's motto: "Excellence Through Perseverance." Then, he led the award winning Pirate Marching Band as drum major, played trumpet in the Miss. Lions All-State Band, and earned a scholarship with Ole Miss' Pride of the South Marching Band.

Unfortunately, Jeff temporarily lost sight of his goals. Without finishing one semester of college, he dropped out of school, got a job as a plumber's helper, and started a family. Digging ditches and handling sewage in summer's heat and winter's cold taught Jeff the value of hard work and made him receptive to change.

While attending a Pearl Band concert in 1976, Jeff sensed a "calling." "I just felt like I needed to do something with my life other than make money. So, I called Porter Burke that night and told him I really wanted to go back to school," Jeff recalls. "I wanted to help young people so bad, and God has blessed me more than ten fold in return."

Those blessings didn't come without trials. Jeff persevered through the trauma of divorce and lean financial times during his college years at Delta State University. "There were a bunch of times I wanted to quit. I thought I was going to starve to death while I was in school," Jeff commented. With the help of family and caring professors at DSU, Jeff graduated and became an assistant band director.

In a 1985 *Twin-City Madison County, Miss. Press* article, columnist Jannie Johnson wrote, "Mr. Cannon has an air of professionalism. When he is on his job, he is about his job. He likes his job, and he likes the children who make his job. Mr. Cannon's no nonsense attitude, dedication, and commitment to excellence have gotten a similar response from his students." Mrs. Johnson reminded her readers that Jeff took the work of two band directors so the school could buy new band uniforms.

Jeff returned to Pearl as assistant band director a few years later, but a 1990 incident threatened to permanently short-circuit his calling to help young people. A student accused him of abuse in a paddling incident. The judge ruled against Jeff, and his accusers argued their case on Geraldo Rivera's syndicated talk show.

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“When the paddling incident happened, my wife Dian kept the faith. I couldn’t understand why, but she assured me the Lord was in control and everything would work out,” Jeff said. Eighteen months later, a special prosecutor dismissed the case. Jeff returned to class and announced, “I am no longer a convicted criminal!” His students responded with cheers and tears.

In 1997, Pearl High School again arrested the nation’s attention when a student entered the Commons area and started shooting. “I was 30 feet from the first child who was killed. I saw him draw down on one of my students, shoot low and miss her,” he said. The band regrouped and won the State Marching Championship only a few weeks after the shooting. On November 24, 1999, the Pirate Band appeared on *The Today Show* at Jeff’s suggestion in order to offset the negative publicity Pearl received in the past.

After directing the Miss. Lions All-State Band to first place at the Lions International Parade Competition in Honolulu last June, Jeff reflected on past accomplishments. “If you asked me 25 years ago if I would be at Pearl, march in the Macy’s Parade, appear on *The Today Show*, serve on the Lion’s Band staff eight times or serve as a church minister of music, I would have laughed in your face. It’s truly a testament of the power of the Lord,” he declared. “II Corinthians 4:7-10 kept me from going under twice: ‘we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.’”

My brother hasn’t wasted a lot of time running rabbit trails and looking for the easiest route. Like the tortoise, Jeff Cannon obtained excellence through perseverance.

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