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Freezing BPA musicians get warm response from Obama at inaugural parade

Millions of people flocked to the nation's capital last week to witness the historic inauguration of President Barack Obama. Most only saw his image on JumboTron screens.

But three BPAers – members of the Northwest's own Get a Life Marching Band – actually got close enough to make eye contact. And as they marched past the White House reviewing stand at the tail end of a long inaugural parade, their



This image, captured from the C-SPAN broadcast, shows Barack and Michelle Obama enjoying the Get a Life Marching Band as they paraded by at 3:46 p.m. Pacific Time.

spirited rock n' roll energy helped perk up the new president and first lady, who gave them big smiles and enthusiastic waves.

"They were smiling, clapping to the music, giving us the thumbs-up," says BPA retiree Audrey Perino, part of the band's color guard. "Michelle was rocking out to the music, and I saw her mouth the words 'thank you.' It was just fabulous."

Perino, Mike Street from Telecommunications Engineering and Jon French from Transmission Planning were part of history on Inauguration Day. Their day was chilly, long and grueling, but it was one for the memory books.

Their journey began in late December, when the Portland-based Get a Life Marching Band* got the exciting news that they had made the cut. More than 1,300 organizations applied for this prestigious event, but only 100 groups were chosen. Among the many bands of young people from high schools, colleges and military academies, the Get a Lifers – who ranged in age from 29 to 71 – definitely

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stood out.

"We're the old codgers, but we always have a good time," Street explains. "Like our motto says, 'We're high stepping and out of shape.'"

Inauguration Day for the 102-person

band began well before dawn's early light and ended almost 24 hours later. They were staying in Philadelphia, the nearest place they could get accommodations, and to avoid the inevitable traffic jams, they loaded onto buses and departed at 2 a.m. When they arrived in D.C. at 5 a.m., people were already starting to stream toward Capitol Hill, where the swearing-in ceremony was to be held.

Though the band didn't get to watch that event in person (parade participants had to wait in a secured staging area near the White House), they listened to the historic proceedings over the radio on their bus.

Unlike previous parades the band had been in, this event had super tight security. Secret Service staff and bomb-sniffing dogs inspected every instrument case as well as everyone's personal belongings. Previously, band members had to submit their Social Security numbers for background checks to obtain the required security credentials.

Plus the parade itself had very strict rules — 47 pages of rules sent by the Armed Forces Inaugural Committee to be exact. Bands were to march at 112 steps per minute, with steps of 27.5 inches, and no stopping was allowed



And here's the band, captured by C-SPAN cameras, as they pass the White House reviewing stand at 3:46 p.m. Pacific Time.



Jon French, Audrey Perino and Mike Street take time out before the parade started to have this photo taken in the staging area. The White House is

on the route. "The _____ pictured in the background.

rules _____
sounded

like government specifications, all right. And I've worked on plenty of those," Street says.

As the band got ready for the start of the parade that afternoon, they encountered a challenge they weren't used to dealing with back home in the Northwest – frigid conditions. "The sun was shining, but it was quite cold," Street recalls. "Temperatures were in the mid-20s, with a wind chill that made it feel like it was in the teens."

Street noticed the valves on his tuba were freezing up, and the same thing was happening to the other brass players. But they put chemical hand-warming pads on their valve casings and blew warm air through their horns, and that did the trick to get their instruments working again.

Finally, the parade stepped off – more than two hours behind schedule. The Get a Life Band was one of the last entries in the parade, and by the time they started marching down Pennsylvania Avenue, it was already dark.

Again, for the band, this was a parade unlike any other. Instead of passing throngs of enthused parade watchers, they saw empty bleachers – all the spectators had left. People had been outside freezing for hours, Street explains, and they sought shelter from the cold rather than sticking around to watch the whole parade.

So the only souls left along the 1.6 mile parade route were security and law enforcement personnel. Although they weren't the most effusive audience, the fun-loving Get a Life band was able to elicit a little reaction from them.



Along with performing for the president, Jon French says the other highlight of his trip was seeing and hearing the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. The bell is rung only twice a year, on July Fourth and Martin Luther King Day. French just happened to arrive in time to witness the symbolic ringing of the nation's symbol of freedom on Jan. 19.

"We were playing, dancing and carrying on like we usually do," says French, who plays trombone. "When we did the opening chant to 'Wooly Bully,' we got the security people, who'd been standing out there all day, to smile. That was rewarding. And that's what the band is known for – getting the crowd to enjoy themselves."

But the band's prime payoff came at the very end of the route when

they passed the White House reviewing stand. Their fingers and toes were cold, but their sound was hot, as they belted out a medley of Grand Funk Railroad's "We're An American Band" and the Pacific Northwest Anthem "Louie Louie."

"If you watched the coverage on TV, you could see that by that point, in what was a long parade, the Obamas were getting a little tired," French says. "But then, all of a sudden when we approached, it was like a shot out of the blue. They really perked up."

"I was about 15 feet away from the reviewing stand, and the president definitely brightened when we went by," Street says. "I waved, and I'm sure I made eye contact with him. Of course, later I found out that everyone on that side of the band swears they made eye contact, too."

After his interaction with President Obama, Street was surprised to notice that his frozen fingertips suddenly warmed up, "probably from the adrenaline rush of the moment," he says.

Reflecting back on that day, band members admit they were disappointed not to have big crowds to entertain along the parade route like they usually do. "But we got to play for the one spectator we came to play for — the president," says Street. "And that was great. It's something I'll remember for the rest of my life."

"What stands out for me is that we actually did it," French says. "It was exciting to represent the state of Oregon, play for the president and the first lady, and be part of something that was extraordinary."

Next up for the Get a Life Marching Band

The band's next big outing is the Chinese New Years' Parade in San Francisco on Feb. 7. Meanwhile, closer to home, the band will have two fundraising performances at local Burgerville restaurants on Jan. 30 and 31. You'll find details on this event — along with photos, videos and extensive press coverage of their inauguration trip — on the [Get a Life Marching Band's Web site](#).

* EDITOR'S NOTE: For this parade, the Get a Life band was restricted to 102 members. Other BPA folks who are currently in the band include Jan Keiski from Environmental Planning and Analysis, Chuck Westbrook from Pre-Schedule & Real Time and retiree Alan Roehl.

Reported by Nancy Harris , January 30, 2009