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IWU Alumna Finds Her Musical Calling in “The President’s Own” Marine Band

For the past two years, trumpet player Amy McCabe was living the typical life of a young musician, “playing weddings and gigs and living paycheck to paycheck.” That all changed this past July, when the 2001 Illinois Wesleyan graduate found herself in full military dress, performing as the newest member of “The President’s Own” United States Marine Band.

Prior to joining “The President’s Own,” McCabe earned a master’s degree in trumpet performance from Northwestern University, was a featured soloist in the Tony/Emmy award-winning show *Blast!*, and performed with the Chicago Civic Orchestra and Walt Disney World All-Star Collegiate Jazz Band. But nothing in her experience could fully prepare her for the intense auditioning required to join the Marine Band. At the John Philip Sousa Band Hall at Marine Barracks in Washington, D.C., she competed against approximately 80 other musicians through four rigorous rounds of auditions, which were conducted behind screens to avoid discrimination. McCabe was also interviewed to ensure that she qualified for the top-level White House security clearance required for all of the band’s performers.

Although all 160 members of “The President’s Own” are considered true Marines, traditional “boot camp” training is not involved. “Instead, we go through a month-long training program with a drum major, where we learn how to wear our uniforms, who to salute when and where, and a lot of history about the organization,” McCabe said. Not requiring band members to endure boot camp likely “helps attract a wider variety of musicians, since some might be afraid of an intense three-month training,” she added.

Established by an Act of Congress in 1798, the U.S. Marine Band performed at Thomas Jefferson’s inauguration and for every presidential inauguration since. It has also been a part of events that shaped the nation, from playing before Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to leading the funeral procession of John F. Kennedy. “The President’s Own” also performs at White House state dinners, gives public concerts, and performs full-honors funerals at Arlington National Cemetery, among other duties. Women were allowed to join the band in 1973 and now comprise a third of its membership.

McCabe’s most memorable performance so far happened this past September. “On September 11, we did a private concert on the steps of the Capitol Building for the senators,” she said. “As we played *God Bless America*, all of the senators began singing along,” as they had previously done on the Capitol steps after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. “It was a morale booster for the day,” said McCabe.

In many aspects, life in the Marines isn’t so different from her past jobs. “A lot of it is very similar,” she said, mentioning the large audiences the Chicago Civic Orchestra also attracted. “But it’s very different from working at Disney World as a musician. That was all cheese and smiles,” she said, laughing. “There’s no cheese and smiles in the Marines!” McCabe finds that she is “continually surrounded by better and better musicians. People in this group come from conservatories and music schools from all over the nation.”

While enjoying her success as a performer, McCabe hasn't given up her roots in elementary education, which was her major at Illinois Wesleyan. In Chicago, she was a member of MusiCorps, a program designed to promote music awareness, appreciation, and training in the city's public schools. She continues to teach private lessons. "There are always opportunities to teach in music," she said.

She recalled that, as an IWU student, she "did everything," including Titan Band, orchestra, and jazz band. Music professors Steve Eggelston and Tom Streeter "were wonderful influences. They both encouraged me, but also warned me that performance is not always a lucrative career," she said. "I feel very fortunate to have the job I have right now."

As for her future with the Marine Band, McCabe isn't sure hers will be a lifelong commitment, as it is with about 60 percent of musicians in the band. "They say I can retire in 20 years, which is kind of a crazy concept," she said. "But I really haven't made that decision yet. I'm satisfied and comfortable with where I am. It's definitely somewhere I want to be for a while."

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