
by Dave Phillips

The Ventures' motto, "There exists a unique breed of young women, for whom pride is a birthmark, dedication is a way of life and the impossible is an achievable goal," aptly describes the most successful all-girl corps in the history of Drum Corps International.

Formed in 1972 by Peter Vanderkolf as a constructive youth activity for young girls in the twin cities of Kitchener/Waterloo, ONT, the corps attracted thousands of young women during its 22-year history as a drum corps. The corps spent its formative years learning the skills of the activity and placed an emphasis on touring, which truly helped develop the corps' performance level and maturity.



Ventures, 1972 (photo by Peter McCusker from the collection of Drum Corps World).

saw this talented group of young ladies in their distinctive gold dresses win the hearts of new fans and impress the judging community with a challenging and entertaining program.

The corps' main competition in the prestigious DCI All-Girl division was the St. Ignatius Girls, the Firettes and CapitolAires. A fourth-place finish was most respectable for such a young corps with a bright future. However, the icing on the cake was winning the Canadian National Championship in the all-girl class and defeating the reigning St. John's Girls of Brantford.

After that season, many veteran members moved on to pursue other interests and the 1977 season was one of rebuilding. The members who stayed and the newer members toured extensively and continued to learn the skills of teamwork and dedication.

In the fall of 1977, an extensive recruiting campaign gathered many new members and the corps also hired its first full-time resident instructors. Three young age-outs of the Seneca Optimists -- Dave MacKinnon and Phil McArthur on brass and Dave Phillips on

Ventures

The 1976 season marked a turning point for the Ventures. A much larger corps was fielded and a tour to the West Coast

percussion -- joined Brain Fazackerly. Up until that time, most staff members were visiting instructors from other corps in the Toronto area and could not always be available for all rehearsals and shows.

That fall also saw the corps acquire its signature buses. Three Mercedes Benz highway cruisers were purchased from Gray Lines Tours in Toronto. The distinctive gold and white color combination and that



(Above) Ventures, 1979 (photo by J. Ian Stott from the collection of Drum Corps World); (below) Ventures, 1979 (photo by Art Luebke from the collection of Drum Corps World).



Mercedes logo made the Ventures the envy of many corps. The buses, however, proved to be a significant challenge to maintain.

In the spring of 1978, Vanderkolf suffered a major heart attack and, although this could have been a major setback for the organization, business manager Bill Renaud assumed the role of director on Vanderkolf's behalf. The 1978 season proved to be the most successful and strong showings occurred in many prestigious contests.

Vanderkolf's health did not improve enough for him to see the corps in competition, but after winning the U.S. Open Class A Championship, the Ventures paraded past his home in full convoy to share the celebration with him. The corps finished the season with a second-place finish to Les Chatelaines at DCI in Denver.

Vanderkolf passed away in December

1978. Renaud and his management team kept everything on track and the corps continued to recruit and improve.

The staff formulated another strong program and the addition of Carl Lenox to the visual program added even greater depth to the corps. The Ventures earned second place to Arbella of Salem, MA, at DCI.

In 1980, Phil McArthur emerged as the director and Renaud assumed the duties of president. Larry Kerchner scored the brass charts and Bill Calhoun wrote for the percussion section. Another new face, Gilles Pacquin, was added to the visual staff.

Along with fellow staff members Lenox, Phillips, McArthur and MacKinnon, the group designed a winning program, which featured a new, colorful uniform featuring a brilliant Mexican poncho. The uniform, along with a colorful, full field of pennants used during the percussion feature, gave the Ventures a strong, crowd-pleasing identity when married with the strength of the brass and percussion sections.

The Ventures captured their first DCI title by winning the combined class A and all-girl event in Birmingham, AL. It was a very exciting time for all involved, including some members who had been with the corps since the beginning.

The summer of 1981 was a rebuilding year for the corps, as many veterans retired after winning the championship. The first rehearsal of the season saw only nine brass players, a few guard and a handful of

drummers. McArthur initiated a brilliant recruiting campaign and attracted enough members to field a corps. As with most Canadian corps, these new kids had no experience whatsoever. Countless hours of rehearsal and fundamentals set the Ventures en route to the West Coast for a 33-day tour, which saw them experience a major financial setback as two of the three bus engines blew in the mountains of Colorado.

Charter buses were hired to allow the corps to finish the tour. Renaud and the board orchestrated a campaign to raise funds to continue the tour and get the girls home safely. The Ventures finished fourth at the 1981 DCI Championship in Montreal.

In 1982, the corps continued to rebuild and placed second once again in the all-girl division. Phillips took over as director. He also started a feeder program, the Ventures Baton Corps, which would later develop into a winter guard program.

The 1983 production was another entertaining collection of popular tunes, earning the Ventures 18th place at the DCI Quarterfinals in open class.

The corps made some significant innovative moves in 1984. First, the corps placed the entire percussion section in the front pit area -- a very controversial move that is still talked about to this day. Second, the corps introduced four colorful uniform changes.

Michael Cesario became a consultant to the corps and for the next several years he lent a great wealth of knowledge and expertise to the staff. Jim Prime Jr. became the brass arranger for the next five seasons and the corps placed sixth in the newly-formed class A and A-60 division of DCI.

The next few seasons were a fast and furious rise for the corps. After placing fifth at the U.S. Open just a few days before, the girls rolled into Madison, WI, and won the 1985 DCI Championship with a brilliant program of music and choreography that captured the hearts of many. The brass section was crisp and musical, and the pit percussion section sounded like the appropriate musical accompaniment. The average age of the corps was just 14 and the girls were defeating much larger and older co-ed groups.

The 1986 program was a more sophisticated approach to symphonic concert band music. The brass section was starting to develop a more mature sound and the pit provided the perfect accompaniment. The corps finished second to the Canadian Knights, but the girls advanced to finish 23rd in the elite DCI Open Class. They were the first all-girl corps to achieve this status.

The corps was starting to receive members from out of the area who wanted to be a part of a successful corps that was not normally seen in an all-girl units.

The 1987 season saw another DCI Class A title for the girls, as well as a 25th place finish in open class. At the conclusion of the 1987 season, Phillips received a call from Mark Schaefer of DEG requesting that Phillips, MacKinnon and three Venture members travel to Japan and visit with the Sumanoura Girls High School of Kobe, Japan.

The two corps formed an exchange program and sister corps agreement, and during the next few years several Japanese members traveled to Canada and marched the summer season as Ventures. Each spring, three Venture members attended the spring camp of the Sumanoura corps.

Sumanoura Director Tomio Yamamoto later changed the name of his corps to Ventures Japan to honor their North



Ventures, 1991 (photo by Alan Winslow from the collection of Drum Corps World).

American counterparts.

The 1988 season saw another unique uniform change and an exciting program based on the musical "Sweet Charity." The girls won DCI Prelims, but lost the finals by one-tenth to L'Insolite. The corps placed 24th in open class again, retaining membership in the top 25.

A few important additions occurred during the planning for the 1989 season. The talented and creative Vern Johansson became a consultant and helped design the "Broadway Ladies" theme. Also, a young new designer named Jon Vanderkolff created his first visual program for the corps that his father had started. Peter Spadero and Michael Klesch scored the brass arrangements. The corps earned another DCI Championship and placed 22nd in open class.

The 1990 season was perhaps the corps' most notable. It began with a mini corps of 35 invited to perform at Expo '90 in Kobe, Japan, along with their sister corps, Sumanoura. The two groups performed together for a memorable gathering of talent; it was truly wonderful.

The summer season was another highlight as the corps won its fifth DCI Class A/Division II title and placed 20th in open class. The dancing doll segment during the percussion feature had judges and audiences in awe with the comedic routine and musical precision of the "My Fair Lady" program.

For 1991, the corps pursued what was perceived as a more mature program titled "Suite Earth." A challenging musical and visual program of classical and symphonic material was a real departure for the entertaining Ventures. The corps also added new uniforms and a giant tarp to the visual program. The demanding production did not achieve the desired effect and often left the audience cold with the corps' departure from previous entertaining and recognizable shows. The corps placed third in division II and 26th in open class.

At the conclusion of the 1991 season, it became increasingly difficult to recruit new members and achieve the competitive level the corps had known. As with other seasons, most members came to the corps with little or no experience. At the conclusion of the 1991 season, so many members left that it became an almost impossible task to field a corps for the 1992 season.

The first camp with brass instructor Mackinnon had only three experienced players on hand. It was a very sobering

experience, much like the fall of 1981. The difference this time was society had changed and it was difficult to find young girls who were willing to give the level of commitment needed to achieve the excellence the corps had come to know.

In 1992, the much smaller and younger corps placed 10th at DCI Championships in division II and for the first time in more than a decade the corps failed to make finals. Continued declining enrollment and a much smaller membership caused the corps to move to division III for 1993. The young corps earned a respectable second place.

In 1994, the final competitive year for the Ventures, they placed eighth at DCI. The following season the drum corps was shut down and the remaining members joined the Kiwanis Cavaliers.

Twenty-two years, thousands of young ladies, many talented staff and designers and hundreds of volunteers all combined to create one of the most amazing and enjoyable corps to ever enter the activity. They are missed, but will never be forgotten. The Ventures organization still exists as a winter guard program and operates two successful units, under the direction of Bill Ranaud's daughter Jacquie.



Ventures, 1990 (photo by the Kingsleys from the collection of Drum Corps World).

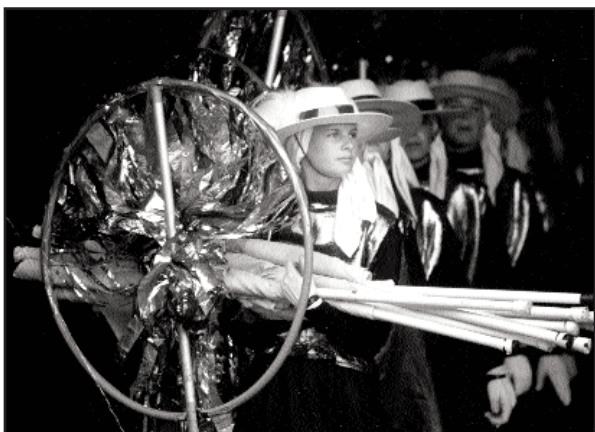


Dave Phillips began his drum corps career at the age of nine as a member of the Scarborough Firefighters Drum Corps. The corps evolved into the Seneca Princemen and ultimately Seneca Optimists.

He played snare drum and was the Canadian national snare champion in 1974. He joined the staff of the Ventures in the fall of 1977 and continued to teach and co-arrange for 16 years. He also taught and arranged for numerous other corps.

Phillips became executive director of the Ventures in 1982 and remained until October 1993. During his tenure, he served as chairman of DCI Class A/A60 and Division III/III from 1985-1990, DCI executive board member from 1987-1990, president of Drum Corps East from 1988-1990, president of the Ontario Drum Corps Association from 1987-1990 and judged for the Ontario Drum Corps Association from 1985-1993.

After retiring in December 1993, he and his wife, Linda, opened the Fireside Café, a restaurant in Wingham, ONT.



Ventures, 1987 (photo by Orlin Wagner from the collection of Drum Corps World).