

Music Faith and Friends
By JODY BENJAMIN
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Members of Fife and Drum Corps, Brass Bands and Youth Bands from across the United States gather at the Florida Nature and Culture Center to create a nationwide family of musicians.

For 162 music group members, it was a time to play music, laugh, learn and deepen their understanding of Buddhism.

Young musicians from across the United States and from Puerto Rico attended the three-day conference at the Florida Nature and Culture Center this weekend. It was the youngest group of conferees ever. The average age was 21. But many of them were as young as 13 and away from home for the first time.

They shared a vast array of stories — from Portland, Ore., where the Youth Band is mushrooming in size and has outgrown available space in the local community center, to Puerto Rico, where members are just hoping to start up a regular activity.

The Youth Bands created in different areas are relatively new co-ed formulations of the Brass Band and Fife and Drum Corps. SGI President Ikeda established both groups in Japan — in 1954 and 1956, respectively — and challenged them to create a cultural movement based on faith that would inspire all people. Some areas of the country maintain a separate Brass Band and Fife and Drum Corps, while other areas have been performing in the coed Youth Band for a few years now. Members in those areas say they prefer it that way.

“It impacts the spirit and how we perform on tunes,” said Andy Matsuda, of Chicago. “Before when we were separate there was this competition thing going on. But now we’re really starting to mesh. That’s been really good.”

As part of the weekend’s activities, the young men’s and young women’s division held separate, informal roundtable discussions. The sometimes emotional, two-hour conversations ranged from how to encourage better musicianship to relationships, from losing a loved one through death to war.

“If I’m drafted into a war and I kill someone, is that wrong or against my religion?” asked 13-year-old Andrew Cody of Demarest, N.J. He said that he remembered his father’s stories of the Vietnam War and had worried about whether he would ever be drafted during his lifetime. Mr. Cody said he did not want to be put in that position. He wanted to live for peace.

“Basically, I learned that if I chanted more, I would be protected from that situation,” he said. “It makes me feel a lot better.”

On the young women’s side, 17-year-old Desiree Wilson of Seattle shared her experience of using faith to overcome a painful physical condition — a kidney infection. On the weekend before Thanksgiving 1996, Wilson had terrible stomach pains. There was blood in her urine. She could hardly eat without vomiting and couldn’t sleep.

“Everything that happened in my life up to that point was normal,” she said. “It was scary.”

But Ms. Wilson told the group that she got round-the-clock support from her mother and other members who chanted with her in her hospital room. Despite an initial gloomy prognosis from doctors, Wilson fully recovered two weeks later. “For me, it was actual proof.”

Marcellus Harper, 20, and Nicole Smith, 22, shared their experiences as leaders of the

Washington, D.C.-area Youth Band. The group, which has a large, active membership, has players as young as 10, 11 and 12 years old, they said.

“With the younger ones, words aren’t always effective,” said Mr. Harper. “You have to try to show by example through your life.”

Ms. Smith agreed. “There’s hope for the future when we have that passion to encourage other people to play,” she said.

The schedule of activities included sessions on strengthening technical skills, such as how to read music, improve rhythm and arrange compositions. And then there was time to chant.

“This weekend was the first time I chanted on my own without anybody asking me to,” said Adrienne Fournier, 14, of Puerto Rico. “I went down to the lake by myself and chanted for half an hour.”

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