

Torchlight Parade Gives Youth a Chance To Shine

By LIZA JAVIER

Seattle, Aug. 1

As the sun slowly sets during the hot August evening, downtown Seattle starts to come alive with excitement as more than 300,000 people line Fourth Avenue for the evening's annual Torchlight Parade. The SGI-USA Seattle Youth Band and Dance Group, prepared to play their renditions of "El Tigre" and "Turn the Beat Around," hit the brightly lit three-mile parade stretch. They perform, they dance, they dazzle — they win Seattle over as they set the streets aglow with brilliant color, music and smiles.

Not since the summer of 1994 has the Seattle Youth Band performed for (and won top honors at) the parade. This year, with first-time parade leaders, performers and time constraints, the challenges and obstacles allowed youth band and dance group members to grow.

"We only had five weeks of marching practice," recalls David Ishii, co-leader of the band. "I didn't think we could do it. But all the youth band members wanted to do the parade, and I realized that it's for the members' sake and not a matter of if I personally want to do it or not. I'm there to help these members grow. If I'm bagging out on them, then I'm not helping them grow."

Irene Ishii, David's sister and co-leader of the band, helps to push David to challenge himself and the youth band's goals. Their sometimes seemingly confrontational (but always caring) working relationship helped the band break new ground. Despite all-weekend-long practices in the hot sun on hot pavement, with faith and lots of chanting they met their seemingly impossible goal of 100 participants, exceeding their last parade participation by nearly 50 percent.

First-time flute section leader Yumi Konno, who has been in the band for eight years, sees how the band united more from the practices. "Usually in the past, youth band members from Portland [Ore.] would always drive three hours to Seattle for practices," she says. "We were always separated from them because we were so far away, and it was hard to form bonds of friendship. I think that the leaders from each area really were determined to combine both bands to make one strong youth band for the parade. I think for the first time the Seattle band even went to Portland for a weekend for practice. The Portland members were so appreciative and gave us the warmest welcome, standing and clapping when we walked in. I was so inspired by their kindness in welcoming us that I wanted to give them a warm welcome to Seattle and made them a sign to really welcome them."

"It was the members' spirit to do it themselves that helped a lot," says David. "Usually most people just complain, complain, complain, but nobody complained this time, especially the younger members who are 12 or 13 years old. Even my biggest complainer said that he couldn't get the song right during practice, and he wanted me to give him the music so he could practice at home."

David muses, "It's got to be the chanting."

"I'm really proud of those guys," he concludes. "I chanted more than I've ever done for any parade. And I learned that with a single-minded determination and chanting, you can accomplish anything."

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