

**This Band Had To Play On**  
**By KEN TANAKA**  
**San Francisco brass band chief**

**San Francisco's Brass Band struggled in the early '90s, but the members' sense of mission to inspire others remained solid.**

San Francisco Brass Band activities began in 1967 with a handful of members practicing to perform for SGI President Ikeda's visit and temple opening in Southern California. The first parade in the United States for the Brass Band and Fife and Drum Corps was in San Francisco the very next year. In addition to the many NSA conventions of the '70s, the Golden Gate Jazz Band lead by Hart Smith, who did the arrangement of "Forever Sensei" used throughout the nation, performed regularly on the U.C. Berkeley campus.

During President Ikeda's visit to San Francisco in 1980, the Brass Band was reorganized, along with the youth division organization, and went on to participate in the many NSA conventions of the '80s as a marching band.

Then came 1990.

There was a lot of confusion after President Ikeda's February 1990 visit to the United States. Performances and practices were canceled, and the older band members taking responsibility at the time were all either reassigned or could no longer regularly participate. Yet a small number of members continued to bring instruments to Sunday activities whether or not they had practice.

After a couple of months of this, band representatives met with the young men's division leaders and were told it was no longer necessary to hold Brass Band practice if it was merely out of formality or force of habit. Each member expressed not only his desire to continue but also to create an activity that would connect young people to President Ikeda and Buddhist philosophy, and inspire everyone around them. Although the rhythm had changed in 1990, it was clear to the few members left that the importance and mission of the Brass Band still existed, and it had to play on.

"I know some of us were apprehensive, being young and having little experience running any organization, let alone a band," says one of those few. "We thought we might do something wrong, and the kids we wanted to help would end up hating SGI activities. But if we didn't do anything, there would be nowhere else they could go to in the SGI. We were confident that the purpose of President Ikeda's guidance was not to eliminate Brass Band but rather to imbue it with heart and philosophy."

Each year since, the band has faced new challenges and fought together through both good times and bad. Ups and downs in participation, disagreements and misunderstandings among the leadership, and inconsistent music quality were problems that had to be addressed again and again. Gradually, this led to improvement in the band, a clearer identity and sense of purpose, and growth of the individual members.

The band performed for President Ikeda during his visit to San Francisco in 1993. It was on that day, March 14, that the junior high and high school divisions were formed. After the performance, a band member said that he wanted to get a name for the band from President Ikeda. Hearing this, a former Brass Band chief felt compelled to convey this wish and the efforts of the band members to President Ikeda, who responded by giving the band the name New Century Brass Band.

To live up to the new name, the band members have continued to challenge themselves. They're striving to improve the quality of their performances, expanding their style and repertoire to allow for the greatest possible participation and fostering an atmosphere where

teenagers, 30-somethings and people in between can discuss Buddhist philosophy as it applies to life and the band.

Their latest challenge is the departure of Paul Bell Wallace, first chief of the New Century Brass Band, who is leaving to pursue business opportunities in Japan.

“It was during President Ikeda’s 1987 visit that I decided upon my path in life, to work to create a cultural bridge between Japan and the United States,” says Mr. Wallace. “My many experiences in the Brass Band taught me to pray and never give up. Well, it was clear after our trip to the Florida Nature and Culture Center that it’s time for me to move on. We became a close-knit group, and each participant now has a clear sense of purpose [of the band]. My dream for the band has been realized. I’ve received so much fortune from participating in the band. It’s important that everyone else has this opportunity to grow as well.”

The New Century Brass Band members say they are ready to face this new challenge, live up to their name and create a new era for San Francisco and beyond.

**WT**