

Marching toward justice: Lessons learned from the Shaw High School Mighty Cardinals Marching Band in East Cleveland

Education, Citizenship and
Social Justice
2016, Vol. 11(3) 231–244
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sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1746197916653554
ecsjs.sagepub.com



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Abstract

The Shaw High School marching band has emerged as a collective site of individual and group pride and empowerment in the stories gathered through the community-based 'Voicing & Action Project', which the Social Justice Institute debuted in East Cleveland. At first glance, a high school marching band might not have much in common with weighty social justice topics such as challenging marginalization, exposing the workings of power, and advancing fairness. However, when people reminisce about their time as members of the marching band, the stories they tell and the lessons they recall suggest building blocks critical to laboring for a more just society. The band is a source of pride, empowers youth, builds community, and increases access to higher education. These qualities can be reimagined as strategies to advance the cause of social justice in East Cleveland and the world beyond.

Keywords

African Americans, community, culture, empowerment, music, social justice, youth

The media has done 'the city a great disservice ... They always sought to do negative stories on East Cleveland, you know. They never sought out to do any positive stories... I think it had a grave impact. It created an image out there. Who wants to do business with a city full of, the way they depicted it, raving lunatics that nobody could control'.

– *Grennetta Taylor*, Community Activist and Shaw High School Alumni Association (King, 2013)

I think I'm doing my part, being in administration with the East Cleveland City School District, being an advocate in the community as it relates to the marching band and just showing the positive side of East Cleveland.

– *Donshon Wilson*, Director, Shaw High School Marching Band (Joy and King, 2012a)

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From Jamaica to South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee, Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, Michigan, Illinois, and Beijing, China, the Shaw High School Mighty Cardinals Marching Band has left gusts of rhythm and a trail of first-place wins in their wake. ‘We had so many trophies’, remembered Angela Benson, a Shaw High School marching band alumna. She graduated in the 1970s, played flute, and learned trombone. She still lives in East Cleveland. ‘We would go to Columbus for the State Fair and win. We would go to Strongsville, win. We would go to ... Geneva. Win. ... We were very competitive, and we worked hard for it’ (Jones and King, 2013).

Hailing from the City of East Cleveland—about a 3-square-mile inner-ring suburb of Cleveland—the band creates more than what prizewinning bands are expected to create: music and cheer-rousing performances. The band’s existence—and the high esteem in which it has been held by students, school officials, parents, and alumni—has created arguably powerful narratives of positivity, success, and community in a predominantly Black city navigating decades of disinvestment and negative perceptions.

Indeed, the marching band has emerged as a site of individual and group pride and empowerment in stories gathered through the community-based ‘Voicing & Action Project’, which the Social Justice Institute debuted in East Cleveland. The ‘Voicing & Action Project’ documented the voices and histories of everyday people, the visions they have for their city, and the ways in which they understood and experienced racial and economic inequalities.¹ At first glance, a high school marching band might not have much in common with weighty social justice topics such as challenging marginalization, exposing the workings of power, and advancing fairness. However, when people reminisce about their time as members of the marching band, the stories they tell and the lessons they recall suggest building blocks critical to laboring for a more just society.

What are the stories and lessons, and how can they open up a broader conversation about or provide the foundation of a model for social justice? While the marching band, as an institution, does not focus explicitly on challenging structural inequalities, it does expose practices that could be leveraged to advance social justice. These include empowering youth, building community and rallying community support, encouraging intergenerational connections, and advancing access, in this case, to higher education. Just as importantly, the band as an organization also serves as an example for thinking about how to create a narrative that dislodges perceptions that can negatively impact opportunities and human dignity (on the power of narratives to shape negative public images of marginalized Black people, impact public memory and place identities, and frame policies and social movement agendas, see Hancock, 2004; Mink, 1998; Sandweiss, 1998; Spillers, 1987).

As we examine the ways in which the marching band illuminates particular practices, we must be mindful that the band primarily caters to students with specific talents or inclinations toward music. As such, it touches a relatively small number of students and community members and is geared primarily toward music education, not transforming society. Even so, the marching band provides an opportunity to challenge hackneyed perceptions, as well as consider strategies that lend themselves to social justice.

African American musical traditions have long been a site of resistance for a people oppressed by racism and economic injustice, particularly in the South. For example, second lining in New Orleans is the most visible function of the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs that support working-class African Americans, helping to maintain a sense of communal pride. Although the struggles of African Americans in New Orleans immediately after Hurricane Katrina differed in magnitude from African Americans in East Cleveland, public performances served to give hope to a community displaced and under siege (Dinerstein, 2009).

Based on collected interviews, the marching band has impacted the lives of East Cleveland residents, particularly students, in at least three ways: empowering youth, building community, and

advancing access to higher education. These strategies, while often focused on individual band members in the East Cleveland School District, could be expanded in a way that explicitly broaches educational equity, racism, disinvestment, and community change.

A source of pride

Alvin Fulton, band director at Shaw High School from 1974 to 1977, inspired many children, both musically and developmentally. Angela Benson, one of his students, recalls that ‘he instilled ... a lot of discipline’ and opened their eyes, as well as those of their parents, to opportunities they would not have otherwise imagined—or experienced. Benson continues,

We were on that Kirk [Middle School] field at 6 o’clock in the morning. We had to be at [the high] school by 8 o’clock.... We’d finish school and then we were back out on the [Kirk] field or the Shaw field, practicing. One thing he would do was get those parents together and tell them, ‘Hey, these kids deserve this [travel]. They done worked hard ...’

We played at the White House. We played at Disney World. My 16th birthday, I was in Florida, marching with Mickey Mouse. That’s something maybe I wouldn’t, couldn’t have experienced. But that was a teacher that loved us, that cared about our wellbeing and wanted to teach us, show us something.

Benson also shared how the band was at times a surrogate family, providing an anchor of support and measure of stability when she found herself foundering emotionally. Benson stated,

I’ll never, I could never repay him, because with my parents divorcing, he became the father that I didn’t have at home.... I [told] him at our full school reunion, ‘Mr. Fulton, you just don’t know how much I love you’. Because, I could have turned out to be something else. (Jones and King, 2013)

Although Benson’s recollection reflects one student’s interactions with one band director, it captures the sense that the band room created a space to challenge sweeping narratives of disinterest and disinvestment—historical and current, external and internal—in African American communities. Benson’s oral testimony creates a counter-narrative that contests the tendency to conflate poverty, crime, and apathy with Black neighborhoods and cities that are confronting economic challenges (Hayward, 2013).

Hit hard by the Great Recession of 2008, the corresponding collapse of the housing market, and responding to systematic disinvestment by both public and private sectors since the early 1990s, East Cleveland is often written off as a stereotypically failing Black community.² While the city is indeed confronting political stress and severe economic instability, East Cleveland is not only its budgets and tax base. This is true although both are critical for its solvency and political autonomy. In other words, disparately emphasizing this reality of economic instability leaves little, if any room, in that narrative for diverse, autonomous people actively engaged in creating meaningful lives.

Some long-term residents envision East Cleveland, a geographically small suburb, as a tight-knit enclave and are actively engaged in their neighborhoods and community politics. Even as residents move in and out of the city, they are at times still connected through family or other associations (Smith, 2014; White and Luminais, 2013). White flight in the inner-ring suburb began in the early 1960s, and ‘by 1984’, according to the *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, ‘East Cleveland was one of the largest predominantly Black communities in [Cuyahoga] county, population 36,957’ (2015). Between 1980 and 2010, the population decreased by almost half, dropping to almost 17,000 (US Census Bureau, 2015a, 2015b).

Prior to deindustrialization, the 1980s crack cocaine epidemic, and economic policies that included defunding cities and slashing the social safety net during the late 20th century, a Black middle class had flourished in East Cleveland (King and Luminais, 2013; Piliawsky, 1994; Wilson, 2010). Like many Black communities in the Northeast and Midwest, East Cleveland was impacted by the shifts in the larger political and economic landscape. White flight led to businesses closing without being replaced. Those who had the means often left the city for other suburbs, taking with them the stable tax base. Political instability combined with financial uncertainty gave rise to a city suffering in ways that were repeated throughout the region. These conditions were not unique to East Cleveland.

The accomplishments of the Shaw Band stand in direct contrast to the challenges and negative images of East Cleveland. Alvin Fulton arrived in the City of East Cleveland in the 1970s, when White flight was well underway. Under Fulton's leadership, the band burgeoned to 200 members—up from its original 28. The program, which began in the late 1940s, has fluctuated in membership, depending on student interest and available funding. Even so, since Fulton who, as a '20-something band director' from Tennessee, introduced Southern-style marching practices—or 'percussive playing and [a] high-stepping look'—in the mid-1970s, the Shaw Band has continued to perfect a Black cultural tradition. In a city that is now more than 90% African American, this has been an important public representation of a positive Black art form that connects performers and spectators alike.³

Although other musical education models have been employed to change children's lives, the case of the Shaw Mighty Cardinals Marching Band is significant because it relies on the community's indigenous art form. *El Sistema*, probably the best known program, is based on a classical music tradition. Initiated in Venezuela, *El Sistema* seeks to use

strong social principles of integration [...] combined with specific musical approaches to achieve individual empowerment as a large-scale alternative to endemic juvenile crime, counteracting the risk factors of social unease, serving as a stimulating example toward emancipation, and providing professional opportunities to the talented. (Majno, 2012: 56)

In some ways, we see parallels between the program in East Cleveland and *El Sistema*, in their aims of showing students different horizons from those that might be limited by race or class and by the emphasis on working together through ensemble playing. However, the marching band tradition of East Cleveland connects students with their African American heritage while at the same time seeking to instill in them a sense of pride in their contemporary community.

Equally important as promoting community pride is the direct impact the band has made in the lives of students, parents, and alumni. The rest of this article will examine the practices of the Shaw Band that lend themselves to social justice, in part because of the band's ability to create and sustain an alternative vision of hope, possibility, and success. As Ndeda N. Letson, a Shaw High School alumna who lives in East Cleveland in a multi-generational household, pondered in her interview, regarding the marching band's 2008 trip to Beijing, 'You know ... the fact that our band went to China has done an amazing thing for parts of the city's image. Now how does the [school] district capitalize that?' (Williams, 2012).

Empowering youth

As a part of Shaw High School, the marching band has promoted and facilitated youth empowerment. According to the memories of former members, the marching band has done this in several distinct ways: encouraging development of the self through musical competitions, acquiring a skill

set that can be shared, making explicit the link between the habits that lead to excellence in band and academics, and providing a positive intergenerational experience outside of the family setting.

While common among high school bands, competitions are not universally appreciated as a goal for musical education (Allsup, 2012). Moreover, the financial costs of traveling to compete, at times, are prohibitive. Even so, students learn very specific lessons through competition. Former students discuss how weekly marching band competitions helped them develop an appreciation for hard work and self-discipline. Angela Benson referred to band as her ‘summer job’: ‘Where they had summer jobs for the kids, that was our summer job—going to band practice’, she recalled. ‘So that was a blessing’ (Jones and King, 2013). William L. Dawson, the elected judge of East Cleveland Municipal Court and author of *The Legal Matrix*, fondly noted, ‘When you are involved with the band, it really becomes your life as a young person. You’re there many hours’ (Joy and King, 2012b). During the height of competition season, students practiced before school, in addition to the afternoon. Maintaining that level of commitment required self-discipline from each student. Although teachers and administrators can help a young person with this development, the responsibility rests on the youth’s shoulders.

Winning competitions provides a measure of reward or external recognition of students’ efforts. While good work does not always result in external recognition, publicly affirmed success, or ‘winning’, nevertheless gives students in the marching band a skill set in which they can see improvement with practice and celebrate individual and collective achievement.⁴ Looking back, many interviewees say that band taught them they could accomplish more than what was expected of them by the media or White supremacist culture. Indeed, well beyond graduation, band members touted their own and the marching band’s achievements.

While former band members were proud of winning local competitions, what really stood out for them was the opportunity to travel across the region or state. Many had not traveled outside of Northeast Ohio prior to band competitions. Sometimes taken for granted in communities with more resources, travel can give students perspective on their own situations and expand their view of the world around them.

In 1976, the marching band competed in Jamaica. Fulton, then director, noted how important it was for his students to see a ‘country governed entirely by blacks’ and also become ‘sensitive to the extreme poverty down there’ (Halfhill, 1976). Some 30 years later, Donshon Wilson, who graduated from Shaw High School in 1987 and became the current director in 2004, perceived and used ‘the marching band as a draw and a tool to allow those students and parents to see things other than what they see around’. Wilson, who attended Central State University and initially volunteered with the band upon his return to East Cleveland, continued, ‘When we go out of town, out of the state, when we travel, they see ... kids their age that look like them, talk like them, but they’re doing something different’ (Joy and King, 2012a). In a city that experienced three recessions and massive disinvestment, Wilson stressed to students that economic hardships should not limit their ability to imagine better futures for themselves and their communities.

Preparing for competitions, which requires learning how to work together, also serves as a metaphor and incentive for advancing the academic aspect of students’ lives. Wilson directly connected the work of preparing all week for a competition to students studying all week for a test. In this way, the long hours of band practice foster a work ethic that extends beyond the band room to the classroom. Moreover, to remain in band, students had to maintain a 3.0 grade point average (GPA). Many students exceeded these expectations and earned grades that put them on the honor or merit rolls (Joy and King, 2012a). In this instance, participation in band and preparing for competitions motivated young people to study and achieve higher grades, to grasp the rewards of hard work, and to instill a sense of pride in themselves and their culture. It also better positioned them for access to higher education.

Broader questions still remain, however: How can that sense of urgency and enthusiasm that empowers youth be transferred to a social justice context? Is competition the best path for young people to learn these things about themselves or, for that matter, sensitize them to unequal and unfair social conditions around them? How are we to view competition in a society where competition and individualism often undergird or mask inequality?

One answer to these questions may rely on the fact that although the band is constantly competing *against other bands*, the band members are competing *together*. This notion of a shared goal (or even adversity) can create a common bond that encourages band members to foster excitement, as well as trust, accountability, and support for one another over time. Band, as a communal experience, crosses generations in East Cleveland. Music that is played together creates a sense of unity. Band members understand that each player adds to the whole. In order to achieve great things, not everyone has to do the same thing, but everyone has to work together. This is an important lesson in organizing for community change toward social justice.

El Sistema takes a similar approach to ensemble playing, believing that classical music as taught traditionally isolates students who practice as soloists and instead focuses on integration within a group (Majno, 2012). Conversely, the One World Youth Arts project in Toronto focuses on ‘non-traditional views of “musical literacy”’ (Mantie, 2008: 473), allowing students to create and produce tracks similar to how the music industry works. This individualism can be understood as empowering but may lead to intense competition as students only rely on themselves to get their music heard. The One World Youth Arts Project does, however, recognize the power of indigenous art forms in reaching disenfranchised youth (Mantie, 2008).

In addition, the Shaw band model for learning disrupts the typical top-down style of leading. Not only does the bandleader provide instruction, but youth section leaders also act as peer mentors. This type of model harbors the potential for social justice work because it encourages students to look to others similarly situated for knowledge. Additionally, it encourages students to see themselves as leaders.

Another way that the Shaw High School marching band may offer insight for social justice organizing is the strength of intergenerational bonds. Former band members spoke of Alvin Fulton with admiration. The band director is a teacher and also a bandleader, both outside and a part of the band. In this way, band members learn to interact with adults as members on the same team. At the same time, the relationship between bandleader and other band members is based on their different social positions—adult or child, teacher or student, leader or follower. Fulton’s positive qualities, as discussed by former band members, included his mentoring skills, his adherence to discipline, and the way he instilled respect.

A social justice movement, if it is to last, must grow and respect its own leaders, including from among youth in the community. Empowerment is an important part of this process. By studying what former marching band members remember about band, we see that it is a place where students recognize learning takes many shapes and can come from a variety of sources. It teaches students how to be part of a larger organization, contributing their unique talents in a way that works in harmony with the whole. It influences how youth relate not only to each other but also across generational differences. The band room and playing field become places that band members can excel as a group, elicit pride and confidence, and change the narrative from disinvestment to empowerment.

Community building

Community building, as raised by former band members, is another aspect of the band experience examined in light of social justice. In numerous ways, this facet of the Shaw High School marching

band has been significantly influenced and most dependent on the charisma and effectiveness of the individual bandleader. Many of those interviewed as part of the Voicing & Action Project were band members under Alvin Fulton or mentioned the current bandleader, Donshon Wilson. While interviewees did mention a couple of other bandleaders, they only did so as a contrast to Fulton and Wilson, who seemed to garner the most respect. They were both viewed as insiders who shared many characteristics with their students and proved their commitment to their well-being by going beyond the band room. At least one of the bandleaders who was less respected, according to one of the interviewees, lost the interest of band members when he attempted to force the band into a traditional marching band model, ignoring the rich history of the African American tradition.

Indeed, many people referenced the importance of the bandleader in directing their lives down a particular path, usually toward higher education. A few people also stated that band ‘saved [them] from the streets’, that is, turned them away from drugs, gangs, or other sorts of life choices that could potentially limit them in the future. Donshon Wilson shared one such story:

We were out practicing outside at Prospect Elementary School and this student came up to me and said, ‘Hey Mr. Wilson, how are you doing?’ He introduced himself to me and said he wanted to join the band. And I asked him how old was he, what grade he was in. He said, ‘I’m in the sixth grade’. And I said, ‘Okay, well, you’ve got a couple more years, by the time you’re in the eighth grade come and see me’. I went on back to practice and he stood around and when we had a break, he came back over and said, ‘Mr. Wilson, I really want to be in the band’. He said, ‘I need something to do because I don’t want these streets to get the best of me’. And at that point, you know, it just clicked for me, wait a minute, I need something for him to do. So I started allowing him to carry my bags ... He was in school, getting suspended every other week, throwing desks and chairs. Got into the program and this kid turned his life around—the highest grade point average when he graduated from Heritage Middle School... He’s in the tenth grade now. He’s in the band now. He also went over to China with us [as a seventh grader] ... He’s been doing phenomenal. He still carries a 4.0 GPA. (Joy and King, 2012a)

In East Cleveland, residents expressed a desire for more robust extracurricular opportunities for youth in the city, whether at school or through the Martin Luther King Jr. Civic Center. Indeed, in numerous interviews, past and present residents lamented the absence of recreational activities to keep youth occupied, as well as the loss of historic amenities such as the city’s swimming pool (Jones, 2012; Joy and King, 2012b).⁵ In April 2014, the Boys & Girls Club took over responsibility for the civic center, with the goal of offering additional programs. When community researchers conducted these interviews and, more importantly, during the time period people were reflecting on (from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s), extracurricular options were viewed as limited (Washington, 2014). The Shaw High School band, however, did provide one such option. Even so, only so many students could actually become band members due to logistical, as well as financial, constraints. Clearly, then, while the band can provide useful lessons about how to contribute to building community, it cannot substitute or replace—nor do we argue otherwise—community building or community-based, youth-oriented social change initiatives.

In yet another way as regards community building, the Shaw High School marching band represents a positive self-portrait of East Cleveland, rather than the negative media portrayals of the city. Through its interaction with the wider community in Cleveland, in Ohio, in the United States, and even the world, the marching band had an opportunity to change the narrative about East Cleveland (Jacobs, 2008). In 2008, the marching band was one of five US high school bands chosen to perform at the Beijing Olympics. Herculean fundraising efforts resulted in donations from foundations and residents, Shaw High School alumni, as well as school children across the country. The community raised USD300,000 for the 60-member band and its chaperones to travel to China in the months leading up to the Great Recession of 2008. Unlike *El Sistema* in Venezuela, there is

little state support for most arts programs, and the Mighty Cardinals Marching Band must rely on its network of supporters. In that way, parallels can be drawn to arts programs in Canada, the United Kingdom, and South Africa (Clennon and Boehm, 2014; Majno, 2012; Mantie, 2008) where state funds are sporadic. This leads to questions about the sustainability of music education geared toward social change.

This tremendous financial support demonstrated how deeply the community believed in the Shaw High School marching band. This trip connected people from all over the world to East Cleveland, challenging residents to consider a wider definition of the word ‘community’ and, according to interviewees, boosting and balancing the city’s image. Not only did Shaw alumni and local and national corporations make the Beijing trip happen, but also the generosity of everyday people. ‘We had a kid send us three dollars, because that was his allowance and he wanted to see us go to Beijing, China’, recalled Donshon Wilson. ‘That right there just put it over the top for me’. Even the largest local newspaper, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, which residents such as Grennetta Taylor believe have tended to print negative news way too often about their city, featured numerous articles about the marching band’s fundraising efforts and its actual trip. Elaborating on the multiple sources of support, Wilson continued, ‘I said, wow, just to see that many people get behind—because I was under that impression, too, that no one is going to help us too much in East Cleveland because of this stereotype or that stereotype’. However, he continued, ‘Keeping our integrity up high ... I think that helped out’ (Joy and King, 2012a). Indeed, the ability of the band to travel financially was linked not only the musical performance but also to the behavior of its band members.

Representing the city came with a special set of expectations, and potential pressures, for these youthful band members. They were expected to behave in a manner above reproach specifically because their interaction with people outside of East Cleveland offered maybe one of few chances for them and the city to transcend its negative image. This is not a new phenomenon. Historically, African Americans have shouldered a particular pressure, not felt by or expected of White people, to represent the entire race. This historical legacy continues into the present day. Black youth, in this case as band members, are held to a high standard, particularly since any transgression could reflect badly on them as individuals and the band, as well as potentially the entire city.

In these ways—as well as another—the band has had direct effects on more than the students. The band also impacts parents. In fact, many parents and other adults become involved in the ‘community’ of the band. This occurred through financial investment, public musical extravaganzas, and parental participation. For instance, Tiffany Fisher shared how being a band parent was an intense experience. Fisher, who was elected to the school board member in 2013, explains,

I became a band mom for two of my children, who’ve graduated, of course, and that was an excellent experience. When I became a band mom, Mr. Donshon Wilson ... required that his parents attend the majority of the meetings, as many as they can but he also understood our work schedule and he knew how to reach us. He always gave us his personal cell phone number if we couldn’t make a meeting and we needed to share our ideas. So what I’m trying to say is for me as a parent, he started getting me involved. He says, ‘You can’t just let your kids go out of town and not attend a meeting. You can’t just let your kids sit up here and take tests and not be at home, telling them to go to bed on time, eat right’. (Perry and Perry-Richardson, 2014)

Community researchers did not interview parents of band members under Fulton’s tenure, but his students report similar expectations of their parents. For Fisher, the band meetings led directly, if accidentally, to her involvement with the school board. One night, while waiting for a band meeting, she mistakenly entered the school board meeting and sat for a time, not sure whether she

should be there or not. Eventually, she began attending more school board meetings as she gained confidence through the band meetings that she could have a direct voice in her children's education. Eventually, encouraged by others, she decided to run for and won a seat on the school board. In numerous ways, then, the band has woven itself into the cultural, social, and political fabric of East Cleveland.

Finally, the tradition of the marching band's drum line has built community by creating a common bond between Shaw High School marching band members from the 1970s to those of today. Annually, the band participates in the Battle of the Bands. Given the Mighty Cardinals Marching Band mostly competes at venues outside of East Cleveland and the state of Ohio, many residents usually do not have the opportunity to attend those competitions. The Battle of the Bands, however, while not always taking place in East Cleveland, is usually close enough that residents are able to attend and show support.

Special events help maintain community feeling (Turner, 2012). The Battle of the Bands provides one local example of this. During the competition, economic and status differences are minimized with business owners cheering just as loudly as retired elders or high school students. When the band plays, there is a sense of unity and fellowship in East Cleveland and arguably a community pride untainted by larger political agendas. Donte Gibbs, an East Cleveland resident and young professional who graduated from Case Western Reserve University, remembers, 'the whole community would pack Shaw Stadium'. The memories flooded back: 'You'll see people along the fence, really, trying to get in. This was like the one event that people really looked forward to, as a sense of community' (Smith, 2013).

The Shaw High School marching band is not only a school organization but also arguably a civic institution that has kept alive community tradition. The band has united the young with the old in a city that can claim three, sometimes even four or five, generations of Black families. Tyretta Harris was a Highlighter (a dancer with the band), as was her daughter, albeit briefly. In this way, families experience the institution together. Even outside of families, the band encourages interactions between people of different generations. 'I was one of the chaperones who went to Beijing, China with the band', said Judge Dawson, who graduated more than 20 years before the interview, continuing,

and it was interesting because we were all outside and it was very hot and me and Mr. Wilson, we were standing by the drummers and somehow, organically, we both ended up on one of the snare drums and we were playing our old cadences and all of the kids were gathered around. It was kind of interesting to see that I could still jam with the younger band students. (Joy and King, 012b)

The marching band does more than span local generations. Through band style and actual travel, the marching band connects young East Clevelanders with other Black students, adults, and traditions across the country, particularly in the South, where the marching band tradition developed and remains strong. East Clevelanders expressed pride in how far, geographically, the band has traveled, often pointing to the first international trip to Jamaica and linking it directly to the journey to China. The band also tours historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) during football season. Even before the students leave on these trips, students learn about the general history of HBCUs, why they were established, the role they have played in educating cadres of Black students, and the specific colleges or universities they will visit. The visits introduce students to college experiences. In numerous ways, then, the band shapes and maintains a larger community in East Cleveland by acting as a focal point for community pride, as well as serving as a potential entre point to civic engagement, moments of intergenerational camaraderie, and broader educational opportunities.

Higher education

The Shaw High School marching band deliberately aims to prepare students for higher education in several ways. The development of students' work ethic discussed earlier fosters a tenacity that can serve young people if they transfer those skills from band practice and performance to academics. Additionally, the GPA requirements require students to perform well in school. Finally, the network formed by Shaw alumni, particularly band members, and the HBCU tours interest and introduce students to higher education.

A critical goal of the band director has been to make members, as students, more competitive in the college environment. In his 2011 interview, Wilson stated, '94 percent of the students were on honor roll or merit roll. We have a 100 percent graduation rate. We had 99 percent go off to colleges and universities, not only on band scholarships but academic scholarships' (Segall, 2011). Currently, Wilson says, about 60% of the students graduate from college with majors from music to business to psychology. The key is matching the student to the school.

Touring HBCUs provided an avenue to interest students in higher education and, for past and present residents interviewed for the Voicing & Action Project, was effective. Of the former East Cleveland residents interviewed who discussed their involvement with the Shaw Band, all went on to college, with most completing a bachelor's degree. HBCUs offered a more familiar picture of education and perhaps even one more supportive of students' experiences than primarily white institutions (PWIs). East Cleveland is a predominantly African American city, and 99% of students at Shaw High School are African American (Ross, 2015; US Census Bureau, 2015b) The tours served a dual purpose—first, to expose students to college and present it as an achievable opportunity; second, to display the talents of the band to the music programs of the colleges so the selection boards would have some prior knowledge about potential applicants.

Matriculating band students often selected HBCUs. These schools were an important part of the network formed by the band as well. In an example of direct intervention, Alvin Fulton left his position at Shaw High School for a position at South Carolina State. He was then able to recommend and ultimately offer some former students music scholarships based on his intimate knowledge of Shaw High School's band program and the students' work. Even once the students whom he personally knew had graduated, Fulton was able to secure auditions for other marching band members. Today, Donshon Wilson continues this tradition and uses his networks to introduce and support students in their college aspirations.

While not a guarantee, college has the potential—in the ways high school once did—to afford opportunities for employment, a greater likelihood of material stability, access to political or social capital, and, depending on the curriculum and professors, an increased understanding of the roots of social injustice. Even so, explicitly addressing and dismantling structural racism and economic inequalities that impact cities and communities like East Cleveland are by no means synonymous with the achievement of a college degree. No one would debate this reality, and neither do we make that leap in this article. Instead, what this article has presented are the ways in which empowerment, community building, and access to greater knowledge—even if disconnected—can serve as building blocks to contribute to social change. In the 'Conclusion' section, we will summarize and assess what lessons can be learned from the experiences of former Shaw Band members and the current bandleader.

Conclusion

A constant peril of social justice movements is burn-out. The community interest in and participation with the Shaw High School marching band over the long haul is a powerful lesson about the

kind of investment communities are capable of. Even this interest, however, waxes and wanes. Prior to Wilson's current tenure, but after Fulton's, the marching band was suffering from lack of funding and general disinterest. That Wilson has been able to sustain community involvement for more than a decade is a testament to his fortitude and skill in developing a web of resources for students, parents, and East Cleveland residents. By activating extended networks, the Shaw High School marching band has been able to continue traveling. As students graduate and go on to pursue their dreams, the network of former band members expands. The pride and identification with Shaw make it possible these alumni will, in turn, help out younger students. In fact, this occurs in college settings every year. In this way, the school band model is sustainable. In ways not accessible to many social justice movements, the marching band constantly attracts new members, trains them, and then sends them out with the help of former students to become a future resource for a new batch of band members.

The question then becomes, 'how do we translate this sustainability to a social justice framework?' Reaching young people at an early age is one strategy. Although there is no similar competition framework to inspire a sense of external validation of accomplishment, we can work to foster the sense of solidarity that comes from working toward a common cause or against shared adversity by making explicit the way oppression works on multiple axes, so someone who is passionate about anti-racism can also support the economic justice movement. Young leaders must be cultivated, which means that young people have to be given the tools to take on significant roles in leadership. One of the things the band does well is empower members to feel like agents in their own lives, able to increase their skills through hard work, and aid their peers in meaningful ways.

One of the drawbacks is the tendency to rely on one or a few charismatic and effective individuals to inspire the devotion and passion required for such an intense and long-term endeavor. This is an issue faced also by grassroots movements. We return again to the idea of cultivating young leaders. Wilson's own experience as a Shaw High School marching band member played a significant role in his becoming the bandleader when he returned to East Cleveland. As an insider, Wilson is able to lead in a culturally appropriate manner. Students relate to his experience directly. This raises a few questions for further study: How many band members return to East Cleveland after leaving the city for higher education? In this way, does the existing structure promote individual achievement over the good of the community? Although the network of Shaw alumni may help particular students get into college or university, whether HBCU or not, does this act as a sort of brain drain? This latter question plagues many cities and suburbs in the Rust Belt and is another social justice issue to consider.

Even when the Shaw bandleader was not Fulton or Wilson, students knew about the tradition of excellence and felt capable of making changes on their own. A Shaw High School graduate who became an East Cleveland Councilmember in 2012 by filling the vacant Ward 4 seat as a result of Councilwoman Mildred Brewer's death, Mansell Baker said he felt a sense of responsibility for the achievements of the band now because he was part of a class that demanded more resources and training during the somewhat tumultuous times in the early 2000s. Because he knew the history of the band, he felt empowered to claim the musical heritage due him as a child of East Cleveland. Learning and teaching history are fundamental if we want young people to feel this kind of prerogative for their rights.

A major challenge is translating the energy generated by the Shaw Band into the more somber issues of social justice. Celebratory joy is synergistic. Work on issues of mass incarceration, the militarization of the police, structural oppression, or environmental injustices do not have the same built-in mechanism to generate feelings of contagious goodwill. One strategy that should not be overlooked is the way the social bonds formed between band members, bandleaders, and the community work to ensure accountability. It is easier to devote a lot of effort toward a project when it

is your friends and family relying on you for a positive outcome. Band members practice in the early morning and late into the night partially because of the social relationships they have formed. The Shaw Band also demonstrates an effective leveraging of public and private investment. This is less difficult than it could be for social justice organizations, depending on how fraught the issue and who is in power. Social justice issues always have an element of critique and accepting, for instance, corporate sponsorship is often freighted with fears of cooptation. However, looking at the Beijing trip as a case study, we can ask ourselves how best to take advantage of earned media or networks to contribute time, capital, or other resources.

Although social justice is not the aim of the Shaw High School marching band, it can provide a glimpse into critical, potentially impactful areas that could be further enhanced and directed if given greater attention: youth empowerment, community building, and access to higher education. East Cleveland, despite the disinvestment it has experienced and continues to confront, has been able to unite around and express a measure of goodwill for the Shaw High School marching band. It is a powerful contestation of the negative stereotypes projected onto the City of East Cleveland and its youth. For this reason, it demands a narrative on its own terms, one of achievements, pride, and tradition.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. 'The Voicing and Action Project is an oral and video life narrative research and community bridge-building initiative developed by the Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) Social Justice Institute. Debuting in the neighboring municipality of East Cleveland, the Institute's collaborative, community-based project gathers and documents residents' personal testimonies as the foundation for empowering residents' voices and contributing to ongoing and future organizing, visioning, education, and revitalization efforts in East Cleveland. East Cleveland residents and stakeholders, as Community Researchers, are gathering the stories of residents, past and present'. See, Voicing & Action Project, Social Justice Institute, Case Western Reserve University, <https://case.edu/socialjustice/research/VAPHome.html>
2. See Hewitt et al. (2006: 19–20):

Where the Black business community was encompassed almost entirely within a Black community isolated by hostile White society, such as in Tulsa, Black businesses experienced some success, but ultimately faced destruction due to predatory aggression by members of the White society. In general, [Butler] points out, if Black businesses appear 'too successful' and their economic prosperity is not shared, and perhaps yielding a predominant share of returns to the Whites, then a situation of competition and hostility emanating from White interests is likely to ensue. In line with these observations, it may be that where Blacks are perceived as controlling all or most political power, which are generally also situations of high Black population percentages, White dominant elites opt of participation economically, leading to disinvestment and declining opportunities for all.

See also Quillian (1999).

3. For information on band membership and the southern Black tradition of marching bands, see WVIZ (2008).

4. Clearly winning is not guaranteed, nor does the lack of a 'win' necessarily diminish the efforts extended, skills learned, or the worthiness of an activity. When engaging in social change work, success is not always manifested in personal recognition or a material reward. This is critically important to recognize and explicitly discuss given the complicated and protracted character of struggles for systemic and structural changes.
5. The Nela Park business park on Noble Road in East Cleveland at one time offered a variety of recreational facilities for its employees, including 'tennis courts, baseball fields, an in-ground swimming pool, bowling alleys, and even an auditorium' (Sisson, 2015). Dawson interview; Martha 'Mrs. Mack' King, Interview by Nancy Nolan Jones, VAP, SJI, East Cleveland, Ohio, 22 August 2012.

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