



# Oak Grove High School Band Boosters

## NEWS RELEASE

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### Ride for Music

*Band director rides bicycle 430 miles to teach students the value of struggle and grit*

By Elizabeth Nguyen

SAN JOSE, June 8 – “We’re riding our bikes 430 miles from UCLA to Oak Grove High School to raise money for the kids. Do you want to come with us?”

Chris Moura is the band director for the award-winning Oak Grove High School Band and Color Guard. He’s been training almost daily in preparation of the grueling ride. From June 19 to June 24, Moura and his cycling team will be riding 430 miles from the Bruins statue on the University of California Los Angeles campus to the finish-line at Oak Grove High School. His goal is to raise \$30,000 for the Oak Grove High School Band Boosters.

He’s been the director of the music program at the Title I school for three decades. This year, the band received less than \$200 from the district to run its music program, said Moura. According to the U.S. News & World Report, the high school, 1 of 16 in the East Side Union High School District, has a total of 94% BIPOC enrollment, and 46% of students who are categorized as being economically disadvantaged.

“The band is a cross-section of the school’s population,” he said. “A lot of these parents work two or three jobs to give their kids a better life. Many of these kids don’t have the opportunity to do things like club sports – 63% of these students are receiving free and reduced lunches.”

The band provides a safe space for many of these students to be themselves, Moura said.

“These kids find another home here – It’s a family,” he said. “You could be the prom king or prom queen, or you could be in special ed. It doesn’t matter if you’re the best player or a beginner. Everyone’s a starter. No one gets benched.”

For many of those who participated in the marching band and color guard, the lessons they learned consisted of more than music.

Myka (Smith) Williams, an executive business partner who graduated in 1996, said that being in the marching band taught her about commitment, teamwork, and integrity.

“In band, every member matters,” she said. “If one of us was missing or not playing up to the level we needed, the whole performance was impacted. It was the first time I heard some variation of ‘We are only as strong as our weakest member.’ And being someone with a physical disability, in a physically demanding activity, I pushed myself extra hard so I wasn’t the reason we lost points.

Williams, who is now a mother of two and played the clarinet in the marching band during her high school career, said that she worked hard to embody what it meant to honor her commitments. She said she did not use her disability as an excuse.

“I think that is what led Moura to create the Myka Smith Spirit Award,” she said. “I think he saw that if I could have that kind of impact without being the ‘best’ player or most athletic, others could be inspired in that way as well. I learned that when you go out into the world (or these days, when you post online), you not only represent yourself, you also represent your family, friends, employer and any other organization you may be a part of, so I act accordingly.”

Williams said she gives the band credit for introducing her to her best friend of 30 years as well as being the place she met her now-husband of ten years.

“The number one thing I got from the band were lifelong friends and my life partner,” she said. “On a more light-hearted note, I learned how to hang my slacks so they don’t lose their crease from years of hanging up marching band (uniform) pants, and 25+ years later, I still think about (the) band every time I line up seams on my pants.”

The leadership skills learned through marching band have carried over into adulthood for many who have participated in the marching band and color guard. Mark Rodriguez, a cybersecurity professional who graduated in 2000 said.

“I am a self-starter and I don’t rely on anyone else to do my job for me,” said Rodriguez, who played trumpet in the marching band. He said he will soon be enrolling his daughter into the program.

“I gained confidence that I belonged in a group that accepted me for who I was. I felt like I was in a family of sorts,” he said. “When you rehearse for as many hours as we did during the marching band season, you learn to look out for one another. When someone is hurting, you hurt. When someone is frustrated with the music or learning drill sets, you lend a helping hand.

Many of these lifelong leadership skills translated well for him after he graduated from the program, he said. ‘You help out in the workplace when someone is falling behind or if someone doesn’t understand the assignment, you just help out where you can,’ he said. “A small helping hand goes a long way when it comes to a team. You start to realize you are a part of something bigger than yourself.”

Melissa (Cheung) Borglum, a full stack engineer and mother of two who now lives in Colorado is an alumna from the class of 2000. She said she learned that hard work leads to tangible progress and achievement of goals.

“Not everything is going to be sunshine and roses,” she said. “It's hard work and can be frustrating. Conditions aren't always the best – weather, injuries, etc. But learning to work through that is invaluable life experience.”

Borglum played the flute in the marching band from 1996-1999. She actively participated despite spending much of a field season recovering from foot surgery.

“It helps knowing that people want you to succeed and are willing to invest the time to see that happen; and that you can work hard and achieve something,” she said. “Competition brings stronger commitment, beneficial for students to have commitments outside of just academics.”

Borglum said that being in the program has many mental, physical and health benefits.

“It was a physical outlet as well as a creative outlet,” she said. “I think I lost, like, 15 lbs during our first band camp. I learned that hydration and sunscreen are so important.”

Ben Nguyen, a data analyst in Redwood City is an alumnus from the class of 1999, said that being in the music program taught him time management.

“You learn to choose how you want to spend your time and what you're willing to sacrifice,” he said. “All of us did marching band and color guard. But we had the opportunity to participate in a jazz band, winter percussion, winter guard and other things. We all had homework and projects to juggle, so you learned the value of your time and hardwork.”

Nguyen, who was part of the pit crew from 1995 to 1998, said that working together as a team taught him patience and tolerance.

“You learn to work together in spite of your personal differences,” he said. “It prepares you for being a good leader in your professional career.”

Jason Askins, an architectural design engineer and alumnus from the class of 2002, said his participation in the band kept him out of trouble.

“The band gave me a purpose in school,” he said. “Something to belong to and stay off the streets. It taught me discipline and commitment and showed me how to work as a team to accomplish common goals.”

Askins who marched in the drumline from 1998 to 2001 said that being in the band challenged him to be the best that he could be, even when he wanted to give up.

"Moura was always a voice of reason to me and gave me big-time life skills on how to deal with everyday issues," he said. "The band changed my life so much that I passed it on to my daughters. My daughter Kylie joined the same program and graduated in 2021. It helped her to deal with some rough times in life as well."

Askins said that it provided him a place of acceptance by his peers where "we can go to be ourselves and be appreciated for that," he said. "Band is the one class that will forever hold a spot in my heart and my family's heart for the rest of our lives."

Beth Braithwaite, who volunteers as the president of Oak Grove High School Band Boosters, said that the benefits her children received from being in the band is the reason why she's involved as a booster.

"I started helping out immediately when I saw what a great community (Moura) had created with the students and the parents," said Braithwaite who is also an English teacher and freelance book editor. "I joined the executive board during the pandemic. I know the band cannot happen without the help of volunteers, so I am doing all that I can to make sure this program continues so all students can have the experience my children have had and are having."

Volunteers are not the only thing needed to keep the program running successfully.

"Our annual budget of \$103K is raised almost solely through fundraising," she said.

This year, the marching band and color guard has the opportunity to perform in the London New Year's Parade, she said. The Ride 4 Moura Music Fundraiser is aiming to raise \$30,000 to provide not only for this performance opportunity, the money is used to fund sheet music, supplies for musical instrument repair and care, transportation for students and equipment, and uniforms among other things.

The ride will begin at 7 a.m. on June 19 at Bruin Statue on the UCLA campus and will finish at 11:30 a.m. on June 24 at Oak Grove High School. They will be stopping in Carpinteria, Lompoc, Atascadero, King City, Monterey, and Watsonville along the way.

Support the youth music program by donating at <https://tinyurl.com/Ride4Moura> or text "Ride4Moura" to 44-321. Come join the celebration at the finish line at 11:30 a.m. on Saturday, June 24 at Oak Grove High School.

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