

by Kevin Russell

June 21, 2017

So, as I sit in my comfortable, humble abode along the Mill Brook, I am contemplating with nervous excitement my upcoming adventure. I am running away with a drum corps – the Boston Crusaders. What this means is that I am trading in my comfortable semi-retirement and summertime in the idyllic



Boston Crusaders Drum and Bugle Corps horn line at
Community Night, Castleton University, Vermont, June 17, 2017

Mad River Valley of Vermont for life as a sort of roadie for 150 young, hard working talented performers. Actually, at 62, I am not really sure what this means. I know that following a drum corps will entail thousands of miles traveled and hundreds of hours of hard work helping the corps stay on the move and performing at its (their) best. Did I tell you that this is a highly competitive activity? For the uninitiated, a drum corps is made up of brass, percussion, and color guard members. The World Class junior corps are the pinnacle of achievement in the marching arts and have members through age 21. The corps members work their butts off perfecting an eleven-minute program and tour all over the country to compete with other corps throughout the summer months, culminating in the championships in August. It is ‘uber’ band camp. I know it is a little hard to explain, so let me begin with a story about how I recently became reintroduced to the drum corps activity.

Back in 1973, my bother and I marched in a VFW drum corps, the Grey Ghosts. This was a small town parade corps that competed with other small corps at the local fireman’s field days following the parades. However, we went to watch the national competitions in Rochester, NY and were blown away by the top corps such as the Madison Scouts, Santa Clara Vanguards and the Boston Crusaders. As a teenager, marching did not stick and I moved on to other endeavors leaving drum corps behind. Fast forward to 2012. It was a dreary winter morning, weather too ugly to ski so I was whiling away the morning caught in a YouTube musical journey. I had recently added a Bose sound system to my 27” iMac and was enjoying listening to just about anything that came into my mind with a few key strokes. Suddenly, the thought of drum corps popped into my mind. “What is the state of drum corps after 40 years of hiatus?” I typed in a few characters and OMG! I dove in with all ten fingers. Looking back at that time five years ago, it seems to have been a life changing moment.

I decided that I would take in a live show in the coming season and headed to Glens Falls, NY, the closest show to Vermont. When I purchased the ticket at the window the guy said, “Let me see if I can get you a good seat.” I found myself firmly planted on the 50-yard line as high up as the old stadium ascended. The first corps’ performance, which is often the lowest ranked corps, was enough to hook me in for good. The corps that followed were even more amazing! Though I was not sure why one of them was doing a Christmas theme in June. Later that summer I bought tickets to the Mecca of the activity, a two-day competition in Allentown, PA, and have been going back there every year since. I now travel every summer to the Boston area as well as other major shows within driving distance in NY, PA and OH. I have also flown to Minneapolis and Atlanta for regional competitions that include over two dozen performing corps in one day. I became a friend of DCI, the sanctioning organization and enjoyed countless hours watching the performance on their archives before they took them down for copyright concerns. As you might have guessed, I have become a drum corps junky. So why am I running away with a drum corps?

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Again, I'm not really sure. I think it is more like running toward something rather than away. I will explore this question further in future posts.

Throughout my five-year re-immersion into DCI, I have become acquainted with the Boston Crusaders, my local corps. If you live anywhere in New England, it is "Boston Nation." Maybe it's that I have met so many awesome folks from the Boston area as a ski instructor at Sugarbush over the past twenty years that I feel such an affinity with the BAC. Boston Strong – Vermont Strong – Harwood Strong. I have had the pleasure of attending many of the regional events in several locations in the Boston area including some unique performances at Tanglewoods Performing Arts Center. Imagine the combined power of BAC, Bluecoats, Phantom Regiment and Cadets all playing Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture under the stars. The year before it was the Blue Devils who came east early to celebrate BAC's 75-anniversary event at Tanglewoods. I was in the round for the BD warm up on the lawn. Freaking awesome! BTW – I love all the corps. It was at a Tanglewoods events where I met a first trumpeter from BAC who, in our brief conversation conveyed the great vibe of the Corps. As a strong appreciator and support of youth music education, I began to think how I could catch and be part of that vibe. How cool would it be to be part of this massive, high spirited, touring ensemble.

The closest physical connection I have to BAC is their spring training at Castleton University, VT, a mere 90-minute drive from my home. I have had the pleasure of attending the Community Nights, where one gets the first glimpse of the new program. This year it was an amazing summer night. The Corps Director, Ron presented the Corps and gave very informative and interesting explanation of the activity and what it takes to produce a program such as this year's "*Wicked Games*." Perhaps you learned of the Salem witch hunts in early American history. The kids performed a run through of the complete show that I thought was very clean. Watch that guard! The program is strong and powerful, dark and beautiful, with a very compelling music rep. The Chris Isaak song *Wicked Game* is performed beautifully by the wonderful guard/singer and then with a rich and melodic explosion of brass. There is something about the rich textures of the BAC brass that really makes this song resonate. This is only going to get better and I was already beginning to tear up. I strongly believe this Corps will take this program a long way up the ladder, perhaps putting them in the top five at the Championships. The Corps also did a standstill of the BAC classics - more watery eyes. Finally, I had the pleasure of meeting some of the guard, and once again that vibe struck me. So that did it. I began to seriously explore how I could hop on board this cool train. I dashed off an essay/resume/email to the volunteer intern link and guess what? They invited me to join them in June. So, this week I am packing up and joining BAC for two shows in Ohio and we'll see where it goes from there. What am I doing and why? Stay tuned. I leave tomorrow, first stop, Albany, NY for the movie theatre. I will keep you posted in future blogs from the road.

by Kevin Russell

Day 1 and 2 - June 23, 2017

Well the season officially kicked off last night. This is my first blog from the road. I attended the live in the cinema performance from Indy at the Crossgates Mall in Albany, NY with a virtually full house in attendance. Though it is not like being at the event live, it was surely entertaining. Bluecoats, Carolina Crown, Cavaliers, Cadets, Blue Stars and Crossman, finished in that order. So if you are like me, you haven't quite got your arms around the programs this year. Last night was revealing in that none of the corps quite have their arms around their program either. It's early.



The entire corps is on the field for the performance of *Giant*, the corps' song.

My take is that all of the programs that I saw (heard) will change and improve as the season progresses. However, even though they came out on top last night, the Bluecoats program has a long way to go to equal last years, definitely a tough act to follow. Where are the soloists? No color? No helmets again, but.....bowler hats? Crown's horn line prowess remains strong with a very difficult repertoire including endless triple tonguing. They obviously have not completed this show as the closer was not there and the program kind of stopped flat. What was it about again? Cadets have their hands full with Bernstein's Mass. This show will get better and better, and you know the Cadets, they will work their butts of to perfect it. Uniforms! Many new uniforms last night. Most specifically, Cadets have shed their classic look and the cummerbund. In fact, shed is what they did, dropping layers throughout the show. I think the bunds will come back as they embellish this show more. Keep your eyes (and ears) on the Cavaliers. Energy, power and speed. The big takeaway for me from watching all of the performance was – SPEED. It is unbelievable how these kids can move from dot to dot with speed and grace while maintaining the power of the sound. Blue Stars have a very class act with beautiful new uniforms to complement the beautiful pageantry and repertoire. It appears that all corps are now firmly in the 21st century with uniforms. The Crossman's performance was not my least favorite, but for some reason did not rise above the others. It is a solid program with a lot of potential. Loved their ballad, again.

Another takeaway from last night was, there is a lot of room for BAC to surge into the top tier with *Wicked Games*.

So, here I sit at a rest area on the NYS Thruway on day two of my journey, slurping a large dark roast and writing this piece as my devices charge. Convenience necessitated my sleeping in the Volvo last night – not bad. No stiff neck. Today, I will be on my way to meet up with the Boston Crusaders on their way through PA to Massillon, OH. I will be making a detour to visit my old alma mater, VVS High in Verona, NY to check on their availability to host the Crusaders in August for the Drums Along the Mohawk, Rome, NY. BTW - Drums Along the Mohawk is a famous novel (and movie starring young Henry Fonda), written by Walter Edmonds that dealt with the tensions between the early settlers and the natives in NY's Mohawk Valley. Tension and release will surely take place on the Rome Free Academy field on August 6. Meanwhile, on to the mid-west heading into the teeth of tornado country. Keep your hat on.

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Day 3 - June 24, 2017

Since I left you at the Iroquois Rest Area on the NYS Thruway yesterday, I have traveled over six hundred miles to Columbiana, OH, the lodging site for the Boston Crusaders for their first competition of the season to be held in Massillon tonight – Innovations in Brass. The trip was reminiscent of the many



Rest area along the Southern Tier Expressway in Seneca Territory.
The three sisters – corn, beans and squash.

times that I traveled the Thruway as a printing salesman in the late 1990's, representing Midstate Printing Company, Syracuse, NY. My territory extended from eastern NYS, Vermont and Massachusetts. With well over a million career miles under my belt, and for other various reasons, I gave up the life as a road warrior for one more locally-based. However, yesterday I got back in touch with my survival driving skills and relived my motto – "caffeine, cruise control, and rock n' roll."

I took a diversion on a mission for Boston Crusaders to the Vernon, Verona, and Sherrill High School to check on availability for housing during Drums Along the Mohawk to be held in the nearby City of Rome on August 6. I had noticed that the Corps had not confirmed arrangements for a site and at my suggestion, they asked me to check into VVS. This was a great opportunity for me to visit my alma mater (class of 72). I marched in the high school band before I got into football. I should have stuck with the band and avoided the concussions. Linda Carter (music wonder woman), and Erin Sanchez, Principals Assistant (glue that holds the school together) were very excited about the prospect of hosting the Corps. However, another site had just been confirmed, the show site, Rome Free Academy. Given that the corps will be in the middle of three shows in a row with Allentown the day before and Massillon the day after, this is good. Maybe next year. Go VVS Red Devils!

I arrived at the housing site, a small regional high school in Columbiana, about 5 hours ahead of the Corps so I pitched my tent behind the ball field and went to sleep. The Crestview High School is in the middle of farmland in northeast Ohio. Lo and behold, about 2:20AM the coaches and trucks arrived. So I pulled on my short, slid into my sandals and checked in with a staff member carrying a walkie-talkie, – Jackie. She informed me that I should show up in the morning to help out with breakfast. I gladly returned to my air mattress and soon the Corps was snuggled into the gym on theirs and we all enjoyed continued slumber in Columbiana.

This morning is a beautiful one for sure, and surely a great day for the kids to work their butts off before the first show. I am excited about returning to Massillon to see another show. Last season, I attended the Tour of Champions competition in Massillon, the last one before the championships, and enjoyed a most entertaining show. What a treat to watch the Bluecoats perform their outstanding 2016 program in their hometown. They also did a great standstill performance to an admiring crowd before the scores. The Bluecoats, as you may know, went on to become World Champions. Tonight's competition will include the Bluecoats, Carolina Crown and the Cadets, a tough line up. The Crusaders are on just before the intermission. I predict that following this competition, they will be on after the intermission.

Now that breakfast has been served, which consisted of pancakes, sausage, cereal and fruit salad, I have time to get caught up on my writing. I helped out with serving the corps members, making eye contact and a smile with Anna, a member that I recognized. I then helped prepare

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four large trays of salad. I cut my finger. I have really enjoyed meeting and working with many of the staff and other volunteers. There are over 50 staff members that travel with the corps. Many run the operational side of things. The food truck in a semi trailer converted into a production kitchen. Some initial take-aways are: they need real maple syrup, can reduce the trash and increase the recycling. The corps members are rehearsing, the staff is busy fixing props, altering uniforms and preparing for the first big night. I have been helping Steve repair some of the guard props with glue and gorilla tape, while Natalie and Kylee are working on their guard uniforms in the art room. Lunch is next. ESL is at 1:00pm. That is eat, shower and load up to head to the show. BIS is at 3:30 (butts in seats). The WOW is about to come.

Well, I did my first dish duty in the kitchen trailer – washing pots and pans. I guess that experience working in a restaurant as a kid came in handy. It is a right of newbieism. Working with Anthony the head chef, I have quickly learned that he is more than a cook but a great friend to many of the staff and returning corps members. He will not be going to the show tonight so that he can prepare the snack and have some long overdue downtime.

The corps is fed and ready for BIS (butts in seats). I am signing off until tomorrow with my reflection on how my first show being on the field with Boston. I have a lanyard Whoo hoo! Though I think I'd rather be in the stands for the program. Wicked.

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Day 4 - June 25, 2017

Every touring corps has a bus breakdown. We had ours last night. Fortunately, it was as we were about to leave the show. Miraculously, there was a bus service nearby that we were able to get the part from at 10:00pm on Saturday night. Even so, it made for a long night and as we returned to the housing site around



Boston Crusaders Drum and Bugle Corps percussion battery warming up next to an abandoned semi near Paul Brown Tiger Stadium, Massillon, Ohio.

2:00am. Now for the good news: The Boston Crusader had an excellent show. The crowd responded throughout the show and were standing at the end. The scores were much higher than the previous years first show which is indicative of the hard work of the kids and staff and the quality of the show. The brass was outstanding, besting the Cadets. The guard performed beautifully, executing some very interesting drills. The consensus among the staff was that the guard scores were not indicative of their good performance. For the uninitiated, scoring is done by official DCI judges in several categories, details that I will not go into at this time. As you can imagine, it is largely subjective and somewhat political. There are certainly rivalries among the corps. I have been hearing some of that with my newly ensconced inside view.

Rather than take my car on the 45-mile trip from Crestview High to the Paul Brown Tiger Stadium in Massillon, I rode on one of the busses with the staff and other volunteers. What a sight it must have been to see the entire convoy of busses, semis, and vans, many emblazoned with the colorful graphics “This Corps is Made of Giants” traversing the rural countryside of northeast Ohio. Once at the show the corps sections split off in every direction around the venue looking for a cool spot to go through a planned rehearsal regimen. I took the opportunity for a nice walk and ran into Garry, who I had met earlier in the day after breakfast at the school. I learned that he is a dedicated executive board member of Inspire Arts, the umbrella organization for the Corps, and a drum corps nut. He and a friend Doug were sitting in the park adjacent to the stadium. I learned that Doug is one of the founders of Carolina Crown. This was a great opportunity to learn about the skin (\$) it takes to be in this game. For instance, this entourage has a very large number of paid staff including the top professionals in the activity. Add that to the cost of transportation, insurance, food, etc., and you have a number that is in the 5 to 25 million-dollar range, depending on the organization to reach World Class status. Some organizations such as the Blue Devils, Concord, CA, field B and C corps in addition to their World Class corps. As you can imagine, this is a winning organization with that kind of depth. Bingo!

Also during my walk around the lot, I stopped to visit with Paul, the horn repair guy who I had seen many times at other shows. I asked him how he could make a living, traveling the country just to fix a few horns. I knew he was into this for other reasons. He laughed and said that he has a small overhead. “See this is my overhead.”, he said pointing to his pop up tent. “It’s over my head.” We exchanged drum corps stories and realized we had some people in common back in Verona, NY. I went to school with his cousins. Small world.

So, the coolest part of the evening for me was being there with the corps to take the field. We followed the Troopers from Casper, WY. I was with the pit trailer that hauled the bass drums, gongs and other miscellaneous percussion pieces. These corps will bang on just about anything. Following us were the keyboardists tugging their rolling instruments. We passed the Troopers pit crew as they left the field. There is also a dedicated sound crew, who set up a high-end

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electronic audio system that plays a recorded sound track of voices and sounds underlying the theme. The rest of the corps members arranged and set up the props and took their place on the field. They went to their starting dot. Marching drills is all about making it from dot to dot. Amazingly, this setup of one hundred and fifty marchers and props, instruments and sound system takes less than five minutes. There are penalties for delays both getting on and off the field, so prop failures or electronic hic-ups can be problematic. Have I mentioned how heavy and large the props are? Thankfully there is an army of members to move the heavy stuff. Large platforms, gallows, stocks, and other structures transform the field with the visual backdrop for the show. These props are not only for looks. The guard and marchers do some crazy moves on them.

The staff and volunteers watched the show from the sidelines and we all held our breaths (at least I did) while the announcer said with enthusiasm and verve, “Boston Crusaders, you may take the field for competition.” What a joy to see the show unfold in front of me at close range. Though I would rather be up high on the 50-yard line, this was truly an interesting perspective. There were many moments when I looked over my shoulder up at the crowd in the stands. These fans were seeing a brand new Boston Crusaders and they liked them. Once the crowd cheering faded the corps made its way off the field with the same smooth operation in reverse. What a night for the first competition of the season.

Today there is no competition and the corps is rehearsing and eating, and rehearsing and eating, and rehearsing and rehearsing. We ESL at 7:00pm and depart at 9:00pm. The caravan rolls at night as much as possible when it moves to new venues to reduce the traffic impact. Everyone but the drivers sleep in their coach berths and then take to the gymnasium floor when they arrive. This will be my first experience with decamping and encamping at a new site. Al, the head transportation planner and truck driver and many other things, plans the route and manages the drivers using GPS and walkie-talkies. Unless the corps is heading to a show site, the trucks usually depart first to break up the convoy. I have met several of the drivers. I found out that Paul is from Stowe, Vermont, 45 minutes from Waitsfield, my hometown. We had a small world moment naming at least three familiar people during our short chat. Vermont is a small town. Mike, who also helps with the prop crew, had the pleasure of driving while his stepson marched. I have also met some other parents who have been coming for a day or two to help see the kids and help out. Natalie and Bill, have been a great help on the uniforms. Liz and son Leo are also on vacation to help the corps and are fellow foodies.

Even though the corps members and staff are working their butts off, there is some downtime for volunteers. I have been walking the campus on my downtime and finding the separate sections rehearsing, each its own little community within the greater community. I have had some good interactions with Tom, the custodian of the school. Each time I cruise the grounds, I find and have been picking up plastic scraps. I told him that I would be sure that the fields were 100% trash free before we left. I had not known then that the corps has designated members who are assigned to this task. This is right along with the leave no trace ethic that I, and my fellow skiers and hikers, ascribe to and I’m glad to be part of the leave it better contingent.

While on one of my walks, I was taking a break, writing, along a mown path next to a cornfield off campus that I thought might be the cross-country running course, and suddenly appeared Phil and Nora on their work ATV. They owned the farm. It was a comical interaction while I artfully explained the reason for the two-day racket. They said I could stay and write and left with big smiles. You had to be there. Victory for esprit de corps. All in all, so far, this has been a great experience, especially meeting the people that I have met. The corps members are starting to take note of me in the food line and around. They are very cool kids. I am starting to tear up

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now, so I am signing off for now. More later on how the most indelible part of all of this for me is the feeling of hope that the dedicated member imbue within me.

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Day 5 - June 26, 2017

Well, we're in Hamilton, OH, just outside Cincinnati. I have now driven 1,000 miles on this journey. Scattered tire debris is worse than I have ever experienced in my many years driving. I found that using my fog lights illuminated the road better for me to see the debris early enough at night. I narrowly avoided running over a large section of tire that would have hurt. One of our trucks had a blowout and it has been changed this morning by a local tire service. The decamping in Columbiana was a well-oiled machine and the site was erased of any presence of the corps before we left. We are now at Mount Healthy High School in Hamilton, OH, outside of Cincinnati. The corps is rehearsing all morning and most of the afternoon again – go figure. BIS (remember? butts in seats) for the show is at 4:00pm. At tonight's show, BAC is on after intermission. BTW - BAC stands for Boston Area Crusaders, though legend has it that the acronym originated to refer to them as the Bad A-- Crusaders. Do not mess with the band kids! BAC will be competing against Carolina Crown and the Bluecoats again and now will match up against the Cavaliers and Crossmen for the first time this season. It is the hope and expectation that BAC will be in third place finish.



One of the larger prop sections that are carried onto the field.
The steep hill to the Mount Healthy High stadium required engine-uity.

I have been spending more time with Steve, the prop and his crew of members on the props, and less time with Anthony the chef. New volunteer parents have been arriving to relieve me of the pots, pans and serving. Thank you, Betsy, Gina, Liz and Leo. Darren, the Tour Manager has suggested that I stay on. I think that I have become a desired member of the team. Tonight is a jump off point for me. Do I stay or do I go? I had only committed to the Ohio shows with Mary-Mason, the Tour Director. The corps is leaving for Evansville Indiana at 9:00pm. I have noticed that I have been using 'we' more often, a sign that I am leaning toward sticking with the corps a little longer before I make the long trip home. I think July will be a very long month for me, waiting to hook up again in Allentown. I have 50-yard line seats for both nights, and then next in Rome and Massillon.

So, before I sign off today, I would like to explore these questions again – Why am I doing this? And, what is it that draws me to the drum corps activity and specifically, the BAC? Firstly, I am very excited to be writing again. I have had a severe lack of motivation as a writer over the past couple of years. Perhaps another reason is what I touched on briefly yesterday – the members. Yesterday at the rehearsal, I met Jen a band director from a neighboring high school. She spoke to me about how the band kids always get along and are more accepting of each other. I get that. Hey, they make beautiful music together that is a very bonding experience. Going through the rigors of drum corps is an ultra-bonding experience. There is also a wide diversity of members, culturally, racially and about 50/50 gender balance. They are all singularly and collectively driven to make the show a big success. Together, they are striving for excellence. But, let me also say that meeting the adults in the room (ha), the staff and other volunteers has been great. This corps has attracted the top talent in the activity. They drive themselves equally hard. Their relationship with the corps members is based on serious respect and understanding. The creative staff members drive the kids hard to achieve perfection and they eat it up. The organizational staff members that I have gotten to know well are just as dedicated and fun to work, and too numerous to mention. These are just some of the reasons that I may stick it out for a few more shows and a few thousand more miles with the Boston

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Crusaders. Given everything that I have observed so far, this could be the best drum corps in the activity, overall. To look at just scores when one makes that statement is to miss the greater part of what this is all about.

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Day 6 - June 27, 2017

9:00 AM

Well, I'm now in Evansville, Indiana. I've decided to stay on for another show tomorrow night, completing a solid week on the road with the corps. I am not quite done with this story yet. Even though I have worked really hard with Anthony the



This is drum corps food.

chef, Steve the prop team, and helping the pit, I know they can do this without me.

Working all day and driving all night is not a good combination, so the reality is that the corps is going on to 30 plus more venues in the heartland, Texas and Florida and I am going home for the 4th of July. Ditching the car and hopping the bus is a fantasy more appropriate for someone younger. And, I do not want to overstay my welcome. I will enjoy a reunion in Allentown.

My extended catnap at the rest area last night made me late to help unload the prop truck and breakfast was well underway when I arrived. I am really happy with the performance of the Volvo but it is starting to take on a lived-in aroma. Fortunately, the dirty laundry and footwear are in the cargo box on top. I'm developing a nice relationship with Siri, my traveling companion. She gave me directions to the nearest Laundromat in Evansville this morning.

OMG – the corn is over my head here! It's not nearly knee high yet where I am from. Another OMG – the corps has been encamped for a few hours at the North High School for a three-day stay. The campus is huge with multiple modern buildings. Our humble Harwood Union High in the Mad River Valley is like a one-room schoolhouse compared to this massive campus. The sky is endless here – all blue. There is no wind (so far) but the sun is high in the sky. Hydration will be super-important today. The corps is enjoying breakfast under the shade of pop ups, the trailer or any where in the dark. I am sure they are in for a long day. It is not a show day and there are lights in the huge stadium adjacent to the sprawling school buildings.

It was a beautiful evening in Hamilton last night. The corps put on a great show. It is getting tighter and more intense and beginning to really resonate. Seeing and hearing a corps program more than once, it can really grow on you. There is just some much you can take in on one viewing. And, the programs mature with cleanness and complexity over the season. Many programs extend their closure to a higher climax, as the members gain the conditioning for the energy it takes for the speed and powerful sound that brings us to our feet in the stands. By August, this show will have caught fire with the fans and I can't wait to see it up high on the 50-yard line in Allentown, Rome and Massillon.

The long drives have given me time to ponder further on the question, why am I doing this? I am finding that this is a multi-part question and answer. Am I doing this for me, or did I volunteer to help the corps? How is someone like me who is self employed, plays solo piano, happily lives alone, and enjoys the solitude of being in nature, so drawn to this massive traveling community? Am I looking for balance? Was this fated to happen? What is behind the coincidental events and intentional decisions that I made, that got me here?

Yes, I am doing this for me. I have always believed that you are helping yourself when you are helping others. Since moving to Vermont in 1995, I have been increasingly involved in community activities, volunteering countless hours for the Friends of the Mad River, Mad River

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Path Association, Vermont City Marathon, Vermont Trails and Greenways Council, and on and on. That is why I have a humble abode and simple life style – volunteering doesn't pay well in dollars. But, I have never been in it for the buck. Before I moved to Vermont, no matter how much I made, I was always broke. We volunteer for the intrinsic value that we are serving a higher purpose other than ourselves. We do it for the greater good off all of us. The compensation is the good feeling and sense of purpose that we gain from it. And, we sleep good at night.

There are jobs that provide those same intrinsic values such as the dedicated music educators, professionals and other staff that run the Boston Crusaders. I have always been drawn to and identify with exceptional things like good music and good food. Drum corps at the level of the BAC is highly exceptional. One important aspect that makes that so, is the high level of respect among everyone involved in the activity. After the performance while rolling the pit back to the trucks we passed the Bluecoats heading to the stadium. Great words of encouragement were shared between the corps. Steve the prop guy mentors prop guys from other corps. Nobody wants to win because the other corps had a prop failure. The BAC and Madison Scouts have a friendship that was established long ago when BAC came to the Scouts rescue when their bus broke down. There is also a high degree of respect among the staff and members of the corps. Yes, this is a top-down type organization in that there is a corps director and a hierarchy of staff below, and then the members who follow the directions of them. Throughout all of these interactions, I have observed only a high degree of respect among all. I have not experienced any negative vibe. This is so cool! Ok, there is surly some inside stuff, like in any organization, but I am not paying attention to that. When it all comes down to show time, everyone is on the ball and in it together. That is the exceptionalism that I identify with.

Steve the prop guy told me a story about yesterday's show that exemplifies the dedication of everyone to work as a team to get the Corps, and all of its regalia on the field. I was not aware of this, but Steve was in panic mode with being late for the prop truck departure due to circumstances, including having to schlep all the props up a very steep hill from the field to the parking lot. No wonder they call it Mt. Healthy High. It is not easy to overstate how serious Steve takes his responsibility to get his stuff to the field. When he arrived at the venue, there was further delay with sorting out the parking of the trailers and busses. You cannot imagine how challenging it is to cram dozens of these vehicles and eight corps membership in competition into the campus of a high school. These delays seriously impinged upon the prop crew's ability to get the stuff from the trucks to the field, a good quarter mile away. Steve put the call out to the operations staff who responded in force to get us to the field so that his crew of performing members could do their warm up. Everyone is on hand to do whatever it takes to make it work. Drum corps has become very prop intensive. There are structures and platforms, many weighing hundreds of pounds. I have been worrying constantly about the kids getting hurt.

1:00pm

Being that this is a non-show day, I have taken the time to organize the tossed salad of clothes and gear in the car and head to the Laundromat. There, I met Lauren who nicely coached me on the washers and dryers. It's been awhile. I asked her how things were going in Evansville. She lamented about the cut backs in education, including the arts. This was in contrast to my experience at North High. She looks forward to leaving Evansville for Florida where there are better opportunities for her three children. She was very nice. I told her that I was traveling with BAC and that I was writing about my experiences. I said that I was not sure if it was a blog, journal or long essay. I said that I was conflicted as to whether I was writing about myself or about the corps. She said, "There is no wrong way to write."

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Day 7 - June 28, 2017

10:00 AM

I have been weaning myself, and the corps away from my volunteer help since I am not going to be with them after tomorrow. I do not want to be counted on for a mission critical task. Though, everything seems to be mission critical. I will help with the show tonight and leave in the morning – maybe. There will be ‘miles to go before I sleep’ on my return to the small town of Vermont.



The three sisters at the Angel Mounds visitor center, Evansville Indiana.

It's flat here in Indiana. Yesterday I walked the site of Angel Mounds, a settlement of the Mississippi Indians from 1500AD. I had a very spiritual feeling the entire walk. The birds were very melodious. As I was returning to the visitor center along a mowed path, a Red-winged Blackbird flew out of the tall grass beside the path above my head squawking. I stopped as he circled above. If I began to walk, he would follow. This went on for several minutes. I wondered: what is he trying to tell me? Then I spied the farmer on his tractor cutting the hay along the path way ahead. He had come down this lane with one pass already to cut the tall grass next to the path where I and the bird were engaged in our conversation. I then realized that the bird was telling me to stop the tractor from cutting anymore so as to save the nestlings in the grass. I said to the bird that I would go see the farmer and stop the tractor. The bird then stopped its hovering circles and quietly returned to a perch. I walked ahead and waved to the farmer who stopped his tractor. I said that it was too hot out in the sun for him to be working so hard. We shook hands and engaged in a friendly conversation about farming, Vermont, Bernie and what have you. Al is 85 years old and raises beef cattle on his small farm next to the mound site. I then told him of my encounter with the bird and asked if he would skip that area for a couple more days. He said he would and was going to quit for the day anyway. It was a remarkable experience and I left thinking that maybe the reason that I came all the way out here was to save the nestling birds. And that is fine.

Have I told you how hard this Corps works? Last night the entire ensemble practiced under the lights working through the show, tweaking and perfecting the drills and music. The run-through was at 11:00pm (central time). I really appreciate how the creative staff and instructors interact with the members. There is very little admonishment and lots of praise. Steve, the head of the brass team has a great approach by always beginning a critique with a complement. This is the same approach that I have been using successfully as a ski instructor. Rather than error detection (you're doing this wrong), I identify a strength and build from there. Such as: "I like the way you are turning your skis together. Now, if you keep your hands forward and shoulders square, you avoid counter rotating your upper body and the turns will be smoother and rounder." BTW – this "strength identification" approach works with your own children, employees, everyone.

Many of the creative staff members are new with BAC, coming from competing corps. This has caused a bit of a buzz in the activity. Can this dream team put together a competitive show? Last year's ranking for BAC was not their best, however they were in the championship line up on finals (top 12). This year, the expectations are high and according to Garry, the board member, the staff team and corps members are already exceeding the board's expectation. *Wicked Games* is a very powerful program that has accent moments that are extremely intense. The speed of

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the drills, the complexity of the guard movements, the incredible brass sound, and the demanding percussion of the battery and front ensemble, makes this a competitive show but a difficult one to master. It is amazing to see and hear the improvements. It is getting cleaner by the day. Let's hope the judges give the credit that is due for this amazing corps and their wicked cool program and see them climb in the standings. Rise.

1:00pm

Well, I am at the eye doctor. Josh, color guard member suffered a kick to the head, receiving a concussion and is experiencing vision problems. The Corps' doctor, Vivian scheduled his appointment with the local eye doctor. I was asked by Ron, the Corps Director to provide a ride for Josh and be with him for the visit. Rifles, sabers, flags and other props can be dangerous, so can a contra bass horn or base drum if you turn the wrong way. The speed and complexity of the programs continue to increase making these occurrences more common. There is a whole team of wellness professionals that travel with the Corps. They have been constantly treating pulls, sprains and bruises. There are four concussions so far. This shoots my theory that it is safer than football. Maybe. The members endure constant sun. They each carry their own cooler and are allowed, mandated frequent drinks as they run through countless takes of sections of the program for hours at a time. Their nearly bare bodies shine with sweat. Tears come as sunscreen gets in their eyes. They sprint to the restroom and back between takes. Josh checked out ok, but the Boston Crusaders will not be marching with their full complement tonight. Blood, sweat and tears.

7:00pm

It is show night. I have found my home with the pit, helping Anna, keyboard synthesizer and sound inducer. Her large console, that houses her keyboard and misc. other electronic gear, is very heavy and hard to roll, especially up hill. I have found that a lot of these stadiums are up a hill or down a hill. This one is up. Anna is a rock star with a beautiful smile, though she is more famous for her expressive scowls during the darker moments of the program. All of the members of the pit, there are thirteen of them, use their facial expressions and body movements effectively to portray the emotion of the music. The pit is setting up for a pre-show rehearsal. I happened to be sitting in the middle of their line up. In addition to Anna's electronic keyboard there are several acoustic keyboards. Juan, the tympanist, will be in the next show. Arriving late with the corps he has learned the music and is ready. Soon the Corps will assemble to take the field. First, they will sing the traditional Corps song. Giants.

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Day 8 - June 29, 2017

10:00AM

Well, it's another absolutely beautiful day in southern Indiana. This encampment has been awesome. I scored. There is a Steinway on the stage and Jane, a retired math teacher and the school's representative unlocked the door and gave



The horn line rehearsing in the late afternoon sun at North High School near Evansville, Indiana.

me permission to play. The piano was donated by the parents of Nick, a student of North High, and pianist who passed away unexpectedly. I learned from Jane that this magnificent school serves a large area of the county extending into the city of Evansville. Building a school so far north of the city was controversial in that the kids who can least afford the transportation have the farthest to travel. This cuts back on student and parent participation in afterschool activities such as the arts and athletics. They use 50 busses daily to get the kids from the city to this campus and back. The prevailing thinking was that the development is moving north.

Hey! The Boston Crusaders took second place last night! When was the last time that happened? Everyone is stoked about the performance. The crowd's favorite corps was the Cavaliers, the judges' scores agreed. However, BAC had made another great impression on the fans. I helped Anna push the synth cart up that hill and that was tough! Then I ran to the top of the stands and stood at the 50 to watch and listen to their performance. This show is going to catch fire! I'm sure that I am now biased toward the Corps but I think it was the cleanest performance of the evening. What is really beginning to resonate with me is the emotional mood swings that I receive from the program. The ballad, *Wicked Game* by Chris Isaak, is very dynamic. It is sung beautifully by Aubrie-Lee, the guard member soloist, and then climaxes with an incredibly powerful moment with the brass. The mix of brass and the soloist voice really works well with this arrangement. It will be a long time before I get that song out of my head. Tears.

I have had some good conversations with Gina, mom and consummate volunteer. She and I are on the same page with concern for the environmental impact of the activity. There are at least 3 things that are thrown away with each person's meal – a plate, fork and napkin. Let's do the math: 200 corps and staff x 4 meals a day x 3 = 2,400 piece of trash per day. Don't even think about the compost. Oh, what about those Styrofoam cups. One trumpeter comes to dinner with his own mess kit. What a concept. Another area of concern for me goes back the transportation impact. In the lot last night, all of the BAC vehicles were turned off. However, another corps diesel was running. It was noisy and detracted from the pit's warm up. It also stunk. It seems ironic to me to put hundreds of the healthiest kids in America in the middle of dozens of foul diesel emitters. Surely there must be technology to keep the air conditioning on in the busses with out their massive impact on noise and air quality. Maybe the trumpeter, Gina and others will help BAC lead the way moving drum corps to clean up its act off the field.

4:00pm

I had a couple of very nice sessions on the Steinway. It was a little out of tune and the una corda was a little out of whack but I found its voice on the second session. I have been completely slacking today while everyone else works hard. My only volunteer duty today was to take the horn instruction team to lunch at a great genuine Mexican restaurant – El Patron. I have mostly

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been working for the operational team and the prop team, so this was a good opportunity to learn about the creative side of this endeavor. There is the music side and the visual side of the equation that equals the total experience. There are the guys that write this stuff and there are the guys that instruct the members. As hunters and gatherers, we humans respond well to sound and motion. These people have taken this activity to a whole new level and the fans are responding.

The kids are coming in from a long afternoon rehearsal. They are in great spirits. We will be decamping tonight. Dinner is at 5:00, sponsored by Band Shoppe, ensemble at 6:30, and BIS at 11:00 for Eastbrook High School for the DCI Central Indiana competition in Muncie. It is a 4-hour drive and begins my journey home as it is in a northeast direction from here.

by Kevin Russell

Day 9 - June 30, 2017

10:00 AM

Here I sit in the Eastbrook High School in Marion, Indiana, 30 minutes north of Muncie. It is much cooler inside. It's pushing 90 degrees and muggy outside. Today is my last day with the Corps for this tour. I will be leaving tonight after the



A rainbow arcing over the Boston Crusaders at
Worthen Arena, Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana.

show. I have adopted a drum corps brother, Garry the board member. He and I will be watching the show from the 50 tonight. The kids are in great spirits, laughing and telling stories during lunch. I'm pretty sure Anthony the chef and Steve the prop guy will be fine without me. Today, I will do the pots and pans for one last time as a parting act with Anthony. I don't think Anna will need help tonight pushing the synth cart and the loading and unloading of the pit trailer is well handled by the rest of the staff and pit members. I will have my butt in the stands tonight.

So, I want to return to the questions about my presence here and what this is all about. I have concluded that this was clearly a fantasy of mine that needed to be fulfilled. Did it inspire me to write again? Yes. Did it get me away from the din of our media and politics? Yes. Did I meet some nice and interesting people in the heartland? Yes. I have not been a complete interloper here, I feel that I have been a welcome presence. I have enjoyed pitching in for some heavy lifting as well as being generally a positive influence in my interactions with everyone. Certainly being under the influence of this spirited organization has inspired me. Now the question has been asked: Will you be coming with us again next year? Maybe I have gotten this out of my system. Maybe not. Have I turned into a complete drum corps junky like Garry? Hmmm....

I have a strong desire to make at least one contribution that will have a lasting impact on the Boston Crusaders. Maybe one area might be sourcing some good food from Vermont to feed the kids. This is not a critique of Anthony's hard work but, I think they could up the game of quality such as more natural and whole foods as opposed to the heavily processed and canned foods that are convenient and inexpensive. The sheer volume, and the fact that they provision along the way, makes this very challenging. The corps directors take nutrition seriously enough and they provide the kids with a good balance of carbs and protein. However, I think they would benefit from real butter and good cheddar cheese. So, I am going to look into lining up Cabot Creamery Cooperative, located in my hometown as a sponsor. It would be great if I could also line up Kenyon's Family Farm for grass-fed beef and Vermont Smoke and Cured for bacon. With some pickled ginger we could make my famous: Ginger Bacon Burgers (rock fans and drummers may get the word play here). Maybe next year while the corps is at spring training in Castleton.

What I didn't realize before I decided to jump on board back in Ohio, was that there is a high degree of buzz in the activity about the BAC. I mentioned the creative staff changes. Gino, is the master creator and his collaborators are many and also highly talented in their respective areas. They came from the top competing corps such as the Cadets and Carolina Crown and have assembled a highly talented group of instructors and corps members. The entire operations staff clicks with the volunteers to provide the basic support of the mission. Jackie, Hanna, Darren, et al. bring it all together smoothly. The entire traveling operation is headed by Ron, the Corps director. He was the one that gave such a good introduction at spring training community night

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to my uninitiated fellow Vermonters in Castleton, and inspired me to act on my fantasy. I have not been able to pin him down for an interview yet so, I will just say that this machine is running on all cylinders, operationally and creatively. Ron's steady, quiet and deliberate approach is what helps keep an even keel on this ship. Everyone responds without question to his level of performance expectation. Also, I want to acknowledge Robert, 19-year old intern, who has been on the job relentlessly with the operations team. He and I worked the pit together, too. He has a promising future with his many creative endeavors. It has been an incredible privilege for me to be associated with such a team. Thank you, so much.

3:00 pm.

It's raining. A glance at the radar does not look good. A long train of thunderstorms is in line for Marion. Hopefully, it will pass over by show time. However, this may make for a wet ESL. I have not seen any tornado warnings on the weather forecast. There has been rain in Vermont. The Mad River reached flood stage last night and is predicted to do so again tonight. There is a reason it is called the Mad. It runs in a northerly direction and can have a strong opinion when it rains hard. This rain is coming so fast now in Marion it is flooding the roads. Let's hope the 40-minute trip to the stadium goes well for the caravaning corps as everyone is decamping from Marion and heading west after the show, while I head east. The Corps has a run of seven of days of one housing site after another each day until they get a break. I do not think I would hold up, so it's good that I will say my good byes for now, today.

5:00pm

Well, I am in the emergency room in Muncie. As I was saying good-bye to the staff, Ron asked, "but could you do me one more favor and take a corps member to the emergency room first." Mason had just slipped on the gymnasium floor and landed on his elbow. The loading crew was in and out during the rain and the floor was wet. While on the way here, Mason and I had a good chat. This is his second year as trumpeter. He said that the corps is working much harder but it is way more fun and interesting this year. All of the corps members are very into the program and working for the new creative staff and instructors.

8:30pm

Well, mother nature rules and we are all inside the Worthen Area at Ball State University, Muncie. Unfortunately, the thunderstorms persisted. The corps are doing standstill presentations of their programs. This is a great opportunity to hear the music even though the acoustics leave much to be desired. The arena was built for basketball but it is great to have it fill in for an alternate venue so that the many drum corps fans did not go home completely disappointed, especially those who like it loud. Mason returned to his corps with no broken bones and I took to the stands. I was allowed in with my backpack and Mac Air. The Madison Scouts just completed their performance. Cool pit. I was reminded of a story I heard from Steve the prop guy about something that happened at the Evansville performance. One of the BAC horn members blew out his knee in rehearsal that day and was on crutches slowly making progress with the corps up that hill I told you about earlier. All the BAC corps members were too focused on getting in position to take the field to notice that he was falling behind. Suddenly, two Scouts got on each side lifting him up the hill and onto the field so that he could join the corps for *Giant*. It was his home show. Teary.

So, what started out in a unique venue for DCI, the theatre, is ending in this unique venue for me now here, an arena. Thanks to my new brother, Garry I have a ticket. There is an extended intermission to wait for the passing storm so that the Crusaders can unload the pit truck. I

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thought that they might still need my help so I walked around to the back of the arena to find the corps. While in route I saw a rainbow arcing over one of the trucks. I found the corps safely inside the area and said my final good bye to Mary-Mason and thanked her for going out on a limb and inviting me to join the corps for the month of June. As I returned to my seat, I began thinking that I have a long way to drive and I don't know where I am going to pull off and sleep tonight. I have not made any arrangements for a hotel. I have become accustomed to sleeping in the Volvo. Let's hope she gets me home with the same reliability that she got me here.

by Kevin Russell

Day 10 - July 1, 2017

I have arrived in Ithaca, NY. I am staying for the night with my sister who works for Cornell University. I am about half way home. Since I left the arena in Muncie, I have been driving, napping, driving and napping. I chased the storm front northeast. How lonely it was with no safe haven to arrive at in the middle of the



Singing Giant, the corps song before Wicked Games.

night. Until now, I have had a pre-planned destination, the schools hosting the BAC.

Last night it was rest areas and 24-hour McDonalds. I am sad to be leaving but glad to be going home. I had originally signed on for just the two Ohio shows but stayed through the Indiana shows for an additional four days completing a solid week and one day. Not bad.

The Crusaders performed their standstill to an appreciative crowd. It was an extended intermission so that BAC could get the pit instruments in between the rain events. The pit did their warm up while the corps took the floor. How impressive they all looked in the huge semicircle that they made. I seriously do not think that the crowd was expecting what they heard when the Corps did it's run through standing still. The program has some very powerful brass moments that hit the crowd head on. They ate it up. Audrey, from the souvenir team sat with me. She played horn for BAC for the two previous seasons. She said she was very excited about the program this year adding that the new BAC sound is very impressive, creating a wall of sound. It surely filled up the arena.

I am winding down this long diatribe but before I do, I want to return to the questions that I have been asking all along. What has compelled me to interject myself into this activity and the living and breathing organization of the Boston Crusader? It may have to do with my affinity for working with youth. As a ski instructor for over 20 years, I have had the pleasure of teaching thousands of young individuals to become great skiers. If you want to stay young, try skiing with a bunch of 8-year olds every weekend. Last October, we lost five young students of Harwood High to a tragic auto accident. They were in the junior class and very good friends of my daughter. We know the families well. This was very devastating to the Harwood community and I have not quit gotten over it, myself. My daughter recently earned her drivers license. As a parent, it takes a leap of faith to let them grow up. She is not into drum corps like I am. However, I would not hesitate to support her joining the Boston Crusaders. From what I have experienced, this is a safe place where everyone is respected. In fact, for some kids, being in this activity is more accepting and welcoming than most anywhere else. And, fortunately no one is burned at the stake like Bridget Butler and the other accused witches were in Salem, Ma in 1692. It has been an honor, privilege and great pleasure for me to have traveled with and be associated with the Boston Crusaders. I wish them all the best. Giants, indeed!

by Kevin Russell

Final - July 2, 2017

Well, I'm back in Vermont, sitting where this blog began 10 days ago. What a strange trip it's been. The story is not over because over the past day and a half of driving and visiting my sisters I have much more to reflect on. While in Ithaca, my sister and I took a nice long walk up to the Cornell campus. The college was originally



The contra bass section rehearsing in Columbiana, Ohio.

founded under the federal Land Grant program established in 1865 by the US Congress under the stewardship of Justin Morrill, a Vermont Senator. Think of the many students who have played and marched there over the years wearing red. Our tour included a visit to the chapel and the Steinway. Joy.

I fell asleep on her couch following an awesome dinner out at Viva Taqueria, and ice cream at Purity Ice Cream, all within walking distance of her humble home. Ithaca is a Tree City and most of the homes have porches and very nice gardens of flowers and shrubs along the streetscape that compete for space with two pedestrians walking abreast. Beautiful. My other sister lives in Clinton, NY, another college town – Hamilton College. They had torrential rains the day before and were cleaning up the mess on their farm from the flash flooding that occurred. I made my way there to help early in the morning. While on the way there I began to think about my brother Danny, the trumpeter, again. He had been on my mind often these past few days. Tragically, Danny was lost 40 years ago. Motorcycle, speed, alcohol, and somewhat of a death wish were the causes. He raced snowmobiles. He lived on the edge. I remember him mastering *Flight of the Bumblebee* in high school. He was a bigger fan of drum corps than I was and would have stayed with the activity and been to many of the shows in the 80s, 90s, and 00s that I missed. Perhaps I made this trip for Danny, too.

We moved a lot of debris around the farmyard and gardens that washed up from the flooding Oriskany Creek before lunch. Once again I fell asleep on a sister's couch for a catnap and then drove the remaining few hours home to Vermont. It is a familiar route so Siri slept the whole way. Now that I am home and under the hypnotic sound of the Mill Brook, I have realized how perfectly the entire adventure has been for me. It was like everything was planned, but then again, it was not. The spontaneous nature of it all, being flexible and prepared to do yeoman's service as a volunteer, visiting my alma mater, having the unique opportunity to meet so many very interesting people, seeing my sisters and helping out in need for them. I think about all the events that had to click for me before embarking.

In 2012 when I began following drum corps again, I was very moved by programs such as the Bluecoats – *Unmasked*, which seemed to bend toward the more personal reflections of life. Cadets – *Side x Side*, captivated me with the haunting Samuel Barber music. As a cancer survivor, Blue Knights – *That One Second*, and *Because* really resonated with me. The Boston Crusaders, *Wicked Games*, is having that same kind of connection with me, especially during the beautifully and powerful ballad. Now having established such a personal connection with the Corps, it will have a lasting impression on me well beyond August. During July, I will watch to see how they climb in the scoring and keep an eye out for some YouTube content. Oh, how I cannot wait to see the show from my 50-yard line seat again in Allentown.

by Kevin Russell

That great vibe that I felt in Castleton, I really connected with during my touring experience for the first four shows of the BAC season. I think the Corps is on it's way to a remarkable season and I am very proud to have been able to play a small part in it. So, why did I do this? Why am I writing this? I now realize, as I'm sure you did early on, that this story is all about me. My favorite boss of all time, Milo, Ski School Director at Sugarbush, Mount Ellen, once said of me, "Kevin likes to share." I think that sums it up. So, don't be surprised if the story continues in August.

End

<http://www.starkmountainproductions.com/BAC/Intro.html>