



Members of the First Coast Wind Symphony trumpet section

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Larry Shughart started playing the trombone in fourth grade. Though he played all through his elementary and high school years, in college and in graduate school, his chosen career path was not musical.

When he moved to Jacksonville in 1993, he found the First Coast Wind Symphony, an all-volunteer community music organization, which gave him a chance to rediscover his musical passion.

"I joined the FCWS because after settling into Jacksonville in my new life, I realized I missed playing the trombone," Shughart said. "Band rehearsals provide an opportunity for me to step away from day-to-day stress and business of life and get re-centered and re-energized."

The FCWS, formerly known as the First Coast Wind Ensemble, is a 50-piece community wind ensemble that was started by Artie Clifton, an associate professor of music at Jacksonville University in 1990.

"We decided to change the name to symphony because we feel it better represents the kind of music we play and what we are about," said Clifton, music director and conductor of the FCWS.

Clifton had moved to Jacksonville from Pennsylvania to teach music at JU in 1989.

When he lived in Allentown, Pa., he was very involved in the community bands there and was surprised there wasn't one in Jacksonville, so he decided to start one.

"A lot of people played in their high school band and when they went to college, they may have still participated in music but when they get involved in their career, they sometimes leave music behind," he said. "That's why we have the group to serve people who want to continue to play because there aren't that many opportunities outside a community band to be able to continue to play."

Clifton said there is the National Association of Concert Bands that supports hundreds of community bands all over the country.

"It provides an opportunity for people that didn't go into music as a career, but still enjoy playing, to continue playing in an ensemble," said Clifton.

The home base of the group is at Jacksonville University.

"JU considers us part of their community outreach," Clifton said. "We use the facilities at JU for practices and they have been very gracious to support this organization for all of these years."

The FCWS concerts are held all over Northeast Florida and are free to everyone.

The membership consists of approximately 80 woodwind, brass and percussion instrumentalists who represent a number of different occupations, including professional musicians. Visitors to their website can see the many different occupations represented in the ensemble.

The symphony regularly performs with 50 players and programs range from classical to popular band music, marches, chamber music and new works.

They practice once a week on Tuesday nights and hold several concerts during their concert season, which runs from October through May.

In order to join the group, a musician needs to prepare a piece of music and complete a successful audition.

"Some community bands are come one, come all, but we, from the very beginning, wanted to have very high standards, so we audition," Clifton said. "Not everyone is able to play up to the level of the group, so we tell them to practice if they haven't played in a while to get back in shape."

Clifton said sometimes they have talented people audition, but they don't have room in the group at that time, so they put them on a reserve list.

"The first opportunity we have open we will call them up and get them involved," Clifton said.

Since the band is a nonprofit organization, they are always looking for support by the community by attending the concerts, helping them promote the concerts, volunteering to help with the concerts or through donations.

Costs that are involved in putting on the free concerts include purchasing music, specialized instruments, travel, insurance, promotion and advertising, annual student scholarships, and fees to bring in world-renowned guest conductors and guest soloists.

Clifton said they try to incorporate education into their events.

"We try to give background as to the pieces we will play and how to listen to the music," he said.

Fred Gorbell has been attending the concerts for four years and really enjoys them.

"I like them because of the caliber of the music and because of the way the conductor explains what is about to be performed," Gorbell said. "On a lesser note, I like that they are free concerts. Other community members should get involved for support of the musicians who are donating their time and talent and for a great musical experience. When you can enjoy yourself and support a group who are giving back to the community, it's a pretty good day."

Music soothes the soul, and the members of the FCWS feel it is their privilege to give back to the community with song.

"I enjoy performing music for the audience," Shughart said. "It is very rewarding to have friends and family attend a concert and tell you afterwards how much they enjoyed the music, how moved they were emotionally by the sounds and colors, and how they appreciate the opportunity to escape from the hustle and bustle of the real world."

Shughart said that in addition to helping fill his need to play, he also realized it helped form long lasting bonds with people with a shared interest.

"I also realized that many of my best friends over the years were people that I had played music with," Shughart said. "Band is a great social outlet that enables you to meet folks from different walks of life that all value the time, dedication, and skills required to make music together. The FCWS allowed me to quickly connect to a new community of other people here in Jacksonville and provided an immediate set of new friends and network connections."

In addition to supporting the community through concerts, they also support young musicians by hosting the Concerto Competition for High School and Collegiate Musicians.

This annual young artist event is designed to promote music education in Florida by providing talented students an opportunity to perform a solo work with the wind symphony. The winner will be chosen through a competitive audition process.

The winner of the competition will receive a \$1,000 cash reward and perform at the FCWS's next concert at Jacksonville University on April 24.

Pete Ryan started attending the concerts 20 years ago and still attends today.

"My wife and I loved it," Ryan said. "It is a fantastic way to celebrate the start of the weekend. It enriches your life and uplifts your spirit."

For more information, visit www.fcwinds.org.