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Evanston-based drill designer has global clientele

Evanston-based drill designer who gave up a career in computers has built a global clientele, and 3 bands are set to use his routines in a national competition

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Where the rest of the world sees an empty football field, former computer engineer Mitch Rogers sees a vast musical stage upon which 150 marching musicians weave in and out of complex formations. It has been that way since he was a teenager.

Rogers, 45, designs drills for marching bands around the world. The Evanston resident's clients include high school bands that spend thousands of dollars mounting productions they present during halftime at football games and in band competitions.

Nearly 100 top high school bands will participate in the annual Bands of America competition in Indianapolis Thursday through Saturday. Three of them -- Center Grove High School from Indiana, Ronald Reagan High School from San Antonio and Stephen F. Austin High School from Sugar Land, Texas -- will march to drills choreographed by Rogers. Rogers has been obsessed with the creative possibilities of band drill design since he was 15 and encountered the Cavaliers -- a community drum and bugle corps now based in Rosemont -- at a public stadium on Chicago's North Side. He was a trombonist with the marching band at Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook, and the summer of 1977 was a defining moment.

"I had never experienced a live marching band of their caliber," Rogers said. "I was thrilled by the pageantry, the intensity of the musical sound and the intricacy of their moves. I was hooked."

Encouraged by his high school band director, Rogers began drawing drills. The next year, he helped design the routine that Glenbrook North used in competition. Still, he chose to major in computer engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Drill design didn't seem like a sensible career choice. He also played the trombone in the U. of I. marching band.

"I preferred band rehearsals and half-time shows to any engineering class," he said. "I wasn't officially designing, but I would doodle band drills on class notes, and listen to drum corps march music in the dorm when I did engineering assignments."

Eager for more band time, Rogers joined the Cavaliers, riding a bus from Urbana to Chicago one weekend a month to rehearse. He played baritone bugle and toured with them during summers.

In 1984, after graduating with an engineering degree, Rogers was hired by Rolling Meadows-based Northrop Defense Systems, now Northrop Grumman, to help design computer hardware for defense systems. But the Cavaliers had also promoted him to field instructor.

"I was more focused on my position with the Cavaliers than on my engineering job," Rogers recalled. "I was also doing drills for Glenbrook North, and my mind was pretty much always on the kids and the bands."

In 1992, Rogers was a key part of helping the Cavaliers win their first Drum Corps International championship, said Gordon Henderson, now director of the UCLA Bruin Marching Band, who in 1992 was music instructor for the Cavaliers' brass section.

"Mitch was energetic and charismatic and got the members of the drum corps to perform at their highest level," Henderson said.

Encouraged by that success, Rogers bid farewell to engineering, leaving a new job with AT&T in Lisle to become a full-time drill designer.

Now he lives in Evanston with his wife and two young daughters and works from home. He is booked months in advance by clients planning for upcoming marching seasons.

Rogers charges up to \$12,000 for a drill that will translate into a 10- to 12-minute production. One drill can involve as many as 200 different formations expressed as 200 separate, computer-generated pages. Drill designs respond to a central theme and to specific music. Many bands hire a separate choreographer for the color guard, 10 to 50 non-musicians who carry flags, rifles, sabers or other props.

A high school or drum corps production can cost as much as \$100,000 including costumes, scenery and special effects.

Dean Westman, orchestra director for the Avon, Ind., school system, has worked with Rogers for years. They are collaborating on a show for the Troopers Drum and Bugle Corps of Casper, Wyo. Westman said that Rogers isn't just a designer, he's also an enthusiastic teacher.

"I know for a fact he has had a life-changing impact on thousands of young adults," Westman said.

Rogers' work extends to Asia. Using his drill formations, the 105-member Aimachi Marching Band and Color Guard of Nagoya, Japan, has won seven All-Japan Band championships since 1998.

In late October, Rogers spent a week in Nagoya refining Aimachi's presentation for the Dec. 16 nationals.

Their theme is "Winter Holiday in New York." To music that includes "Manhattan Love Story" by Naoki Sato and "East Coast Pictures" by Nigel Hess, this multigenerational band will maneuver around props resembling skyscrapers.

Rogers sees himself as an artist wielding his laptop as paint, brush and canvas.

A drill is a set of charts directing band members' moves during every beat of the music. Brass, woodwinds or percussion sections must be strategically placed so the entire band projects sound.

"I tell bands where to move, and the band director tells them how to move," he said. Once a client assigns him a theme and music, he follows a personal ritual. First, he surfs the Internet for plays, movies, books, ballets, operas and articles about the topic. Next, he spends many hours at an Evanston coffee shop, where he plants himself on a couch and pulls his Cubs hat down over his eyes.

"I let my mind just float while associations come in," he said. "Then, when I start to map out the actual drill, my concentration is intense. It's somewhat like playing chess -- I start with an opening idea and move, and carefully plan where each piece -- or musician -- is going."

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