



## **Memories of St. Rita's Brassmen** by Mark Riley

"Formation A!" Even now, more than 30 years later, the words have resonance. As I set out for Glendale, Queens, this past March 5, they came back, spoken in the back of my head, gravelly, Brooklyn accent and all.

I was joining more than 100 others for a very special gathering. Members of St. Joseph's Patron Cadets (1962-1968) and St. Rita's Brassmen (1969-1973) were coming together for a reunion, the second since the corps' last competitive season.

This one would be different. The man, who more than any other defined St. Joe's/St. Rita's, wouldn't be there with us. Carman Cluna passed away in 2001, yet his spirit was there, along with drum corps legend, Hy Dreitzer, Father Dominic Schiraldi, Fran Virgilio, Tony Franco, Tom Costa and many others whose life's journey ended before March 5, 2005. Their spirits moved among us as we hugged old friends and discussed old times.

Ironically, the reunion brought together members who still see each other during the competitive drum corps season. Names like Johnny Oddo, Mark Holub, Barry Swain, Ray Richardson and Ruben Ariola are still in the activity leading others, as Carman, Hy and Eric Perrilloux led us. Even some who couldn't make it, like Ted Swartzberg, Jimmy Drost and Keith Warfield. Frank Nash remains active all these years later. Many of us marched together in other corps after the Brassmen experience ended. George "Side mouth" Richardson, Jimmy Maldonado and Nunzio Virgilio were all there.

There were no "middle-age moments." The names came back . . . Josie (who came up from North Carolina), Denise, Sullivan, Charlie Sugden, Joe Luggi, Flip. We were all one again, and 30 years melted away before our eyes.

We owe our closeness, and the extraordinary turnout for the reunion, to the keepers of the flame -- Reggie Henry, Harold Barber and Ronald Washington created a Web site ([www.stritasbrassmen.org](http://www.stritasbrassmen.org)) second to none.

It has become an easy way to stay in contact, but it's much more than that. There is music -- St. Joe's and Brassmen music. The written history goes back to youth centers and church basements, the World's Fair where we practiced and, of course, Randall's Island, the drum corps Mecca of New York City.

The man who put the reunion together, Eugene Brown, deserves special thanks. Eugene catered the event, arranged the venue, Yer Man's Pub, and hosted in typical Brassmen style.

Johnny Oddo, whose work as a drum arranger and instructor is known nationwide, exceeded the formal part of the reunion. All present were honored that Carman's widow, Brenda Cluna, and Hy's widow, Florence Dreitzer, attended and stood as living legacies to the work of their husbands. Their daughters, Jamie Cluna-Barbara and Annette Dreitzer-Phillips, spoke on behalf of their families.

Cluna-Barbara spoke eloquently of her father's dedication to the youth who came under his tutelage and influence. "We take great pride in knowing that even future generations, though never having had the opportunity to meet my dad, will have been influenced by the values that he instilled in their parents, whether it be their work ethic, dedication, quest for excellence or just their love of music."

Dreitzer-Phillips spoke of her father's love for St. Joe's and St. Rita's, as well as the people who marched in the corps. "Everyone who knew my father knows how outgoing and sociable he was, and how he was never too busy to stop and chat with members or colleagues. I know the spirit of this great corps lives on and, because of that, so does my father's legacy."

Indeed.

Nunzio Virgilio spoke, as did Ray Richardson, Harold Barber and this writer. There was levity as members of the Brassmen color guard sang their own special rendition of Summertime, first used as a plea for a food stop during the return from the 1970 VFW Nationals in Miami Beach, FL.

We dined on Eugene's wonderful food and many of us laughed, cried and promised to stay in touch. And all the while, for me there was a nagging question. Just what was it that made St. Joe's/St. Rita's so special? Why do we all look back with such passion at those intense and exciting summers we spent as kids? That night, at the reunion, I think I came up with an answer, at least as close to one as I'll get.

We live in a time of celebrity worship, of personal aggrandizement, the culture of self. The people who gave us this magnificent drum corps never thought of themselves first. They took personal pride in our accomplishments without seeing their names on the front page of a newspaper.

In short, they did it for us, not for themselves. Even in today's drum corps activity, that unselfishness seems in short supply.

And so, for one night, we came together at an Irish pub in Queens, to celebrate that door of opportunity opened to us by a drum and bugle corps. For that night -- and maybe others to come -- the memories flooded back.

The Manning Bowl, Midwood High School field, the CYO, the Dream, the highs, the lows and all that makes our lives worth living.

I left the pub that night with the strains of West Point Alma Mater ringing in my ears.  
Could a Brassmen Alumni Corps be in sight?