

June 16, 2021

Letter of Nomination for George Hilger – Contemporary Category
Garfield Cadets Plebes 1968-1970
Garfield Cadets 1971-1979

To the Members of the Cadets Hall of Fame Committee,

I would like to nominate my brother George Hilger to be considered for the Cadets Hall of Fame. Unfortunately, we lost George in 2003. I can think of no greater way to honor to his memory.

Each of us who marched with the corps may have a different interpretation of what it 'means to be a Cadet.' For many, it is something that you may not be able to adequately describe but know when you see it. I can say without reservation that George embodied the highest ideals of what being a Cadet meant to me: a dogged pursuit of personal excellence, a high level of discipline, a strong desire to help make those around you better, and a deep love for the organization. Looking back, I think the excellence of the Cadets over the years was built on the shining example of those who came before us. Even at such a young age, we were aware of the corps' history and the call to build on its success, even in the organization's 'lean years'. I think George internalized that history and that call, himself becoming part of the shining example for those who had the privilege of knowing him.

George and I both grew up in Garfield, NJ and joined the plebes in 1968, when I was 8 and George 10. One of the great things about the corps, even at the level of the Plebes, was that there was always a goal to strive for. Initially, it was to become good enough to make the 'big corps,' which George did in time for the 1971 season, and I a year later. We both competed with the Cadets through the 1979 season. Our sister Karen was also a Cadet for a couple of years. I think George was never prouder than when he wore the Cadet uniform. I remember how fastidious he was in making sure his baritone gleamed before every competition, cleaning it inside and out, taking it apart and reassembling it. When he wore the uniform, nothing was out of place.

Those who marched with George knew him for his on the field leadership. He was something of a larger-than-life character, with his muscular build and commanding presence. He had the gift of challenging those around him to be their best in a way that was positive, motivating, even compelling. I think that is because people knew that he demanded no less from himself. He'd walk up to one of the younger baritone players who might not have been giving their full attention to their alignment within a formation and exclaim "Not good enough, rookie! Now drop and give me twenty pushups!" But George would do twenty pushups right along with that rookie, both with huge smiles on their faces. Before a competition George would walk up to nearly every corps member and make sure they were "Psyched!" His enthusiasm was infectious.

George's leadership was built on the foundation of his mastery of the baritone. He was a Cadet soloist for several years and also competed in the DCI Individual competition. For much of the 1970s, Cadets brass players used valve-rotary bugles, which I can tell you were more difficult to play than a three-valve instrument. Yet, George chose to play a Bill Watrous number for his performance. People might think it is crazy to cover a song by a jazz trombonist known for his technical virtuosity, but George was unbowed. He chased after that challenge with a vengeance. Eventually, George was able to play runs into a range that I could only admire. He also had a full, lovely velvet tone that I attempted to emulate in my own playing.

Lest anyone think that George was a 'natural talent' as a brass player, I would suggest that a lot of what he accomplished was through unending practice and sheer force of will. George bought a used copy of Arban's Conservatory Method and used that to teach himself, and then me, to read music and build our technical skill. I remember George breaking that Bill Watrous piece down note by note and practicing it hundreds of times, having to ice his lips to reduce the inflammation (George had dental issues that caused him a lot of pain when he played for too many hours in a row). As a result of all that practice, George got to the point where it seemed he could play effortlessly: high, low, fast, slow, manic, melodic. It seemed sometimes that the baritone was an extension of George's arms, and his arms hard-wired to his brain (and heart). But I knew it wasn't effortless.

After George aged out of the Cadets, it was a foregone conclusion that he would spend his life in music. After graduating from university, he became a music educator. His own musicianship also continued to grow after college. Every time I caught up with George in those years it seemed he had taught himself to play yet another instrument. And nearly every time we spoke he shared a memory of our years in the corps. It was impossible for us to remember our formative years without thinking of the Cadets. I know how much of a gift it was for me to share that experience with George, and I suspect it was for others who knew him.

I'm attaching 2 letters of support, from Frank Dorritie and Pat Zampetti. I wish I could include all the others that were sent – from Beth McGarril, Cheryl Beattie Koeler, Dennis Aquilina, Dennis Dewey, Gary Schubel, Greg Cinzio, Jim Trimblett, Lillie Nemece, and Mark Oberthaler, since their kind words about George mean a great deal to me

Thanks so much for your consideration.

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