

NHHS band goes to nationals

By Sarah Sobanski

North Hastings High School's music band has performed at nationals for the first time in nearly a decade.

The 74-student, all level and all grades band set off for the 46th MusicFest May 14 to 19. They were granted an honorary invitation after NHHS music teacher Dianne Winmill was awarded Teacher of the Year by MusiCounts last year.

"I'm hoping this will be an annual thing, where we go this year and the students love it and get hooked," Winmill explained before the band set off for Toronto. "Then next year, they'll say, 'Miss Winmill, we have to go to nationals again.' And then it just keeps going from there. They just work that much harder and they know what this whole nationals thing is all about."

She described the band as a varsity concert band with woodwinds, brass and percussion. It's the biggest band she's taught.

Students came from all grades with all different skill levels. Anyone who wanted to go, and met the requirements such as having funds for the trip, was able to take part in the opportunity.

The band practiced music that best suited the levels of players in the band, said Winmill. They practised the music they would play at nationals as a part of their curriculum. Those who had music in first semester learned the band's set then, and those who had it in second semester learned it in second semester.

The entire band came together in April for extensive three-hour rehearsals once a week. Winmill said the students were exhausted from working so hard and some even also practising for the 60th annual North Hastings Music Festival that took place May 7 to 11.

But, she said, they were sounding "fantastic." She said, even so, students were asking to practise more, something she said was rare to hear as a music teacher.

The band got one shot to perform in front of people before performing in front of more than 8,000 students at nationals for the first time at the NHMF in front of an adjudicator.

"[The adjudicator] liked our dynamics and he said we played with a lot of energy and he gave us a lot of stuff that individuals could work on before we perform [at nationals]," said Winmill.

She described nationals as an opportunity for students to listen to musicians from across Canada, have their horizons expanded by visiting the big city where they'd stay in University of Toronto residency and, of course, to improve their knowledge and artistry.

"A lot of it is intrinsic, because we have no other schools around here. It's not like we live in downtown Toronto where there's eight high schools within two miles," she said, explaining students would learn just from hearing and comparing themselves with other musicians. "Our students [usually] have no frame of reference. We're the only game in town."

She said students would see bands from across the country and added, "It will be a good experience just to be immersed in that."

Winmill said she went to nationals in high school herself. The last time she went with NHHS students was in 2009 with a nine-voice women's choir. The time before that she went in 2001 with a few bands from the school.