

# THE NEWS-PRESS

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Sunday, Dec. 24, 2006

## Band steps off for London Wait is over for New Year's adventure

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Play ball!

Make that, strike up the band!

The moment of truth has arrived for Fort Myers High's ballyhooed marching band. On Tuesday, 115 teens will hop on an eight-hour flight to London, where they'll star in London's New Year's Day parade.

After nine months of emotional highs and lows, fundraising peaks and valleys, students have packed up their parkas and put British pounds in their pockets for a band trip like no other.

"Everybody is so happy and excited that we finally made it," said sophomore Lacey Lind, 15, who plays the clarinet. "We're getting more excited day by day."

Call it cliché, but many teens have deemed the London trek their "trip of a lifetime." A look at their limited travel resumés confirms the tag:

- 43 students have never visited another country, and another 13 teens' only international experience is Canada.
- 41 have not ridden a subway train, or "The Tube" as Londoners say.
- Only nine have ever climbed aboard a double-decker bus, a staple on London streets.
- Six teens have never flown in an airplane.

Sophomore flautist Brittany Idlette, 15, checked "no" to all of the above. She's only left town to attend family reunions in South Carolina; the farthest she's ever traveled is Maryland.

Idlette has never experienced freezing temperatures or seen snow, but she completed a winter clothing shopping spree to brace for London's climate change. High temperatures climb to a balmy average of 44 degrees, with mercury dipping to 33 degrees at night.

As far as her flight preparations, though, Idlette can't simply cover up with ear muffs and a scarf.

"I'm excited-slash-nervous about the airplane," she said. "I told my mom and dad that I would never go on a plane. I think about it crashing."



Idlette won't have long to stew over her fears Tuesday. Her travel group is the first to depart for London. The marching band's travel party — 198 strong, including chaperones and family members — is split among three commercial flights.

Saxophone player Austin Pierce, too, has a fresh passport. She's embarking on her first flight en route to her first international destination.

The 16-year-old sophomore has only left Florida once, to visit family in Virginia. She says it's hard to believe the moment finally has arrived, but the thought of taking an overseas trip is too overwhelming let alone contemplating what London will be like.

"I'm not sure what to expect," Pierce said. "We'll see when we get there."

Other students, such as junior clarinetist Nilushi Karunamuni, 16, have tattered passports from traveling near and far. She has visited eight countries, including England. Eleven other band members also are making a return visit to the United Kingdom.

But this trip to London almost didn't happen.

Last spring, local school officials drew the scorn of Britons by denying the trip, primarily based on the July 2005 terrorist attack that killed 52 people on London's subway trains and a bus. After an international uproar, Fort Myers parents ultimately were given the task of voting, and they approved the trip by a 101-3 margin.

Parade organizers celebrated the parents' decision, and have championed Fort Myers High as the keynote participant this year. The band already hosted British dignitaries back in October, and two U.K. students spent a week in Fort Myers last month after winning a BBC-London talent competition. On Thursday, students will give a one-hour performance at Trafalgar Square, in the heart of London, as an introduction to the British media and Britons on their lunch break.



Most band members have been studying travel books and scouring Web sites to familiarize themselves with London. Students also have tapped into senior Holly Decker as a resource.

The flautist takes the trans-Atlantic flight annually; her mother and grandmother hail from the London suburbs. Decker has fielded all sorts of questions about London, and she has served as an unofficial travel guide for her inquisitive peers.

"It's a lovely place with an amazing history," said Decker, 17.

The Green Wave band will stroll by a millennium of history on New Year's Day, marching past the likes of Westminster Abbey, Big Ben and the houses of Parliament, Royal Horse Guards Palace, Trafalgar Square and Piccadilly Circus.

The 2007 New Year's parade features 103 bands, clubs and London boroughs. Organizers predict 400,000 spectators will line Westminster streets, and tens of millions will tune in to a live satellite telecast.

The London parade, in its 21st year, rivals New York City's Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade with 10,000 participants. Fort Myers joins 15 other U.S. schools that secured invites by either being heard by a parade representative or snagging a thumbs-up from a school that's previously marched in London.

Students will spend seven days in London. The parade itself will only occupy a few hours of the band's time. On the other days, the Fort Myers delegation will take a coach tour of London and day trips to Hampton Court Palace and Warwick Castle.

They'll see a theatrical performance of "We Will Rock You," a youth concert, and tour the Tower of London. For nourishment, the band will dine at a traditional British pub and a fish and chips restaurant.

The trip is their reward for an exhausting nine-month fundraising campaign to cover the \$2,245 per student cost. The band made wire transfers totaling \$441,970, including parents and family members who footed their share out-of-pocket.

The band collected \$211,530 through 549 donations, a majority processed right after the initial controversy. But band director Mark Dahlberg didn't want students, or the community, thinking the band was resting on its laurels for a free trip.

Teens and band parents coordinated car washes nearly every weekend, public performances, a fishing tournament, car show and bowling event. They even provided music at a pair of local weddings.



"We had to put our noses to the grindstone and work really hard," said parent Christy Hobbs, who has two daughters in the band. "Now we can have fun. Now the pressure is off."

#### **NEWS-PRESS.COM/BAND:**

- Flip through photo galleries
- Peruse our band archive
- Read new stories and a reporter's blog
- Watch video of a band performance
- Scour bios of every band member
- View an interactive map of the parade route
- Read daily blogs by three band members in London
- See photos taken by the students during their trip

#### **ITINERARY**

##### **Tuesday**

- Overnight flight to London

##### **Wednesday**

- Arrive in London
- Walk parade route

##### **Thursday**

- London city tour
- Media performance at Trafalgar Square
- Small group excursions

##### **Friday**

- Hampton Court tour
- Tower of London
- Fish and chips restaurant
- "Music for London" concert

##### **Saturday**

- Stratford and Warwick tour
- Small group excursions

##### **Sunday, Dec. 31**

- Small group excursions
- New Year's Eve party

### **Monday, Jan. 1**

- New Year's Day parade
- Dinner at English pub
- "We Will Rock You" show

### **Tuesday, Jan. 2**

- Return flight to U.S.

## **THE CONTROVERSY**

Britons don't take rejection lightly, especially when they feel insulted. London's New Year's Day parade organizers balked at the reason Lee County School District administration initially vetoed Fort Myers High's marching band trip. "We don't have trains blowing up in America," school administrator Herb Wiseman told The News-Press on March 17. His comment fueled an international media frenzy after it spread to the Associated Press and across Great Britain. Superintendent James Browder received more than 100 e-mails in a three-day period after the news broke.

Here's what key players said at the time:

- "I wouldn't want to have kids in London that were going to come participate in some kind of festivity in Florida be told that it was unsafe. It's a two-way street."  
— *Jeb Bush, Florida governor*
- "Here is an educator that seems to delight in the knowledge that he is ignorant of the facts. How can he make a decision banning so many young people embarking on a cultural visit which they will remember for the rest of their lives without first bothering to find out the facts?"  
— *Robert Bone, executive director of London's New Year's Day parade*
- "My concern is about terrorism — we are at war. I have never come off my concerns. I'll be praying real hard that nothing happens."  
— *James Browder, superintendent of Lee County Schools*
- "We're leery of loading 140 students onto an airplane and flying across the ocean to London, where they just had a terrorist attack. We don't think at this time that it's worth the risk."  
— *Herb Wiseman, Lee County administrator in charge of high schools*

## **LONDON FACTS**

- Founded: Romans established London in 43 A.D.
- Population: 12-14 million in Greater London
- Size: 609 square miles in Greater London
- Time zone: Greenwich Mean Time (five hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time)
- Average temperature on Jan. 1: 44 degrees for high, 33 degrees for low
- Most popular tourist attraction: Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace
- Modes of transport: The Tube, black cabs, autos
- Congestion charge: Motorists pay about \$30 just to enter central London.
- Olympics: London beat out rival Paris to host the 2012 Summer Olympics

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## Various reasons keep some students home Parents, passport, personal choice

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On New Year's Day, Fort Myers High's marching band will entertain tens of millions who will watch London's New Year's Day parade from the streets of Westminster or on TV.

At the same time, drummer Makis Williams will be waking up in his Southwest Florida home. Flautist Sarah Gerrero will be entertaining her grandma. And saxophone player Tyler Conner will be relaxing after a stressful semester.

In all, 19 of 134 marching band members aren't taking the London trip.

London was optional — no harm, no foul if students or their parents decided not to participate.

But all semester, the 19 have endured hours of London this and London that from their peers, creating a few awkward and isolated moments. All band members received T-shirts saying "London Bound" to wear at fundraisers. They performed at community events, only to see those major donations defray London expenses. Band booster meetings proceeded more like London planning sessions.

It's not that the 19 students didn't want to accompany the band overseas.

Senior Dana Chatelier, who plays the flute, was optimistic she would march Jan. 1, but she ran into paperwork roadblocks.

Somewhere along the line in completing her application for permanent residency in the United States, Chatelier was listed as coming from Haiti. That is her mother's native country. Chatelier hails from St. Martin in the Caribbean. After months of back and forth and consultation with an immigration attorney, the 17-year-old could not obtain a passport in time.

The prospect of not heading on the trip didn't keep Chatelier from donning her band uniform at fundraisers and performances across town.

"Just because I'm not going doesn't mean I won't participate in everything they are doing," Chatelier said.

Williams, 17, made his sales pitch last spring to march in London, but his mom and dad didn't bite.



“My parents didn’t like the thought of me going overseas with all that’s been going on,” Williams said, referring to terrorist bombings and security threats throughout Europe. “My mother’s concern won the argument.”

Williams said he respects their decision.

Gerrero, 16, initially convinced her parents that she’d be OK in the U.K.

Then came Aug. 10.

That’s when British officials uncovered a terrorist plot to use liquids and gels to blow up flights between London and the United States. That news squashed the junior’s hope of traveling with the band.

“They were uneasy about me going overseas, but when the whole terrorist thing happened, it was definitely ‘no,’ ” she said.

Instead of performing for thousands of Britons, Gerrero will entertain her grandmother, who is traveling from Ohio for the holidays.

Conner, a 16-year-old junior, decided on his own to stay home, taking it easy after a grueling semester in Fort Myers High’s rigorous International Baccalaureate program. He weighed the debate about safety and terrorism but believes fears that band members are entering an unsafe environment are unfounded.

“I didn’t see those as realistic,” he said. “I don’t think they would be more unsafe there than anywhere else.”

One of Conner’s biggest concerns is next year’s marching band, specifically, a dropoff in membership. Band director Mark Dahlberg correctly forecast a larger band this year, but Conner worries that a few dozen fair-weather friends will drop their instruments for good without a London-esque light at the end of the tunnel in 2007.

“Last year, they were in marching band to be in marching band,” Conner said. “Now, they’re only in it for London.”