

Erica Shirley's love of music is infectious.

You can hear it in her voice when she talks about her "work" as New Hope High School's band director. You also can see it on the walls of her office in the band hall. The pictures chart Shirley's musical progression and include her time as a trumpet player in Mississippi State University's Famous Maroon Band.

There also is a mural and a picture on the right wall that help explain why Shirley is in her current position.

"The reason I became a band director is because I saw Miss (Tracy) Blaylock," Shirley said, looking up to the mural and picture. "I saw a woman who played trumpet just like me and I didn't know you could do this for a living."

Now in her 10<sup>th</sup> year as band director at her alma mater, Shirley will lead the Trojans to the Mississippi Bandmasters Association / Mississippi High School Activities Association State Marching Band Competition on Saturday at Brandon High. New Hope will compete in the Class 5A portion of the event at 8 p.m. The awards will be presented at 10 p.m.

The event comes on the heels of the band receiving a score of one in drum major and percussion and an overall score of one at MHSAA Region 1 Marching Band Evaluation on Oct. 7 at Tupelo High.

New Hope continued its strong showings Oct. 21 when it received an overall Superior rating at the Hoover Invitational Marching Festival in Hoover, Alabama. The band received best in class percussion and best in class soloist and finished third overall in its class.

Shirley praised assistant band director Ryan Jobe for his fine work on drills and marching. She said Jobe's experience marching at the highest levels has allowed her to focus on the music. But as much as she loves music, Shirley said there was a time she never would have envisioned becoming a band director.

Initially, Shirley was going to be a nurse. In the summer of Shirley's 10<sup>th</sup>-grade year, she considered quitting band in part because New Hope High was going to have a new band director: Blaylock.

Robin Shirley, Erica's mother, wasn't having it.

"Had my mother let me quit, I would not be where I am today," Shirley said. "Miss Blaylock ended up becoming one of my best friends."

Blaylock also became a mentor for Shirley and helped her earn a scholarship to attend MSU, where she was a section leader from the fall of 2004 to the fall of 2008. Shirley was a member of the band that traveled to London to play a concert at the Royal Military School. She also performed in the Jazz Band, the Wind Ensemble and Trumpet Consorts, which is like a Trumpet choir, and was a member of the band that played at MSU basketball games. Shirley graduated from MSU in 2009 with a degree in instrumental music education. She went on to earn a graduate degree in music education from the University of Southern Mississippi.

Shirley taught for six years at Columbus Middle School before she returned to New Hope High to be an assistant band director for Blaylock, who was band director for nearly 20 years before she died in November 2019.

Shirley said she hopes her students feel her love for music just like she felt Blaylock's passion. She admits her job isn't always easy because she

often gets pulled in different directions – sometimes at the same time, especially with 85 in the high school band – but she still loves what she does.

“Teaching this is like a foreign language,” Shirley said. “It is cross-curricular because they read music and there also is math. There is Music History and science, so it has aspects of all the core subjects.”

New Hope High Principal Matt Smith praised the work Shirley and Jobe have done this season in helping the band reach the state competition this weekend.

“Miss Shirley and Mr. Jobe have worked tirelessly with our students to build a program and performance we can all be proud of,” Smith said. “The administrative team at New Hope High School wishes the Trojan Band and the band directors the very best of luck in the upcoming state competition.”

Shirley said it is satisfying to see the progress the band has made since it started the season in July at band camp. She said it is a challenge juggling coaching and teaching and piecing together the music and the marching. But Shirley said being part of a team helps students learn their music and their steps.

It’s a little easier to accomplish those goals when you have a band director who loves music as much as Shirley.

“The coaching aspect is doing my best to make sure they’re well-rounded individuals and they are where they are supposed to be and doing what they’re supposed to be,” Shirley said. “The teaching aspect is teaching them to be musicians and teaching them the passion of music and how to love the craft.

“You have to be enthusiastic. Somebody said they don’t care unless they know you are caring. You have to be loving, caring and passionate about your craft and passionate about music.”