

CALEDONIA -- Shelby Wilbanks understands music's power of attraction.

Initially, though, Wilbanks intended to feel that power as a band manager at Kossuth High School. That plan changed when the band director told Wilbanks it would be better if he joined the band. As a result, Wilbanks learned to play the French Horn by the second semester of his junior year.

Wilbanks' first taste of being in a band family left an impression.

Two years later, music's power of attraction touched Wilbanks again, this time in his freshman year at Northeast Mississippi Community College. After starting the year as a science education major, Wilbanks discovered his heart wasn't in it and turned to music in part because of the sense of camaraderie he experienced in high school.

"In the band setting, you're all working toward one goal," Wilbanks said. "You're all working together to make the most beautiful sound."

Wilbanks is doing his best to help the Caledonia High School band create plenty of beautiful music. At 4 p.m. Saturday, Caledonia High will compete at the Mississippi Bandmasters Association / Mississippi High School Activities Association State Marching Band Competition at Pearl High. The awards ceremony will be at 5:30 p.m.

Caledonia High earned a place at the state competition thanks to its showing Oct. 7 at the MHSAA Region 1 Marching Band Competition at Tupelo High. The band earned superior ratings for the drum major, color guard and band and an excellent rating in percussion.

That showing came on the heels of Caledonia receiving All-Superior ratings and finishing second in Class 4A on Sept. 30 at Northeast

Mississippi Community College (NEMCC) in Booneville. Junior drum major Ella Shepherd was named the top drum major in Class 4A and Outstanding Field Commander in the competition.

Wilbanks, who is in his sixth year as band director at Caledonia High, said the band's accomplishments are a sign of the program's growth from his first year when he had 81 kids a day, which included a keyboarding class. This year, there are 99 in the high school band and 225 in the program.

"The kids really feed off each other's energy," Wilbanks said. "It has been a blessing to see this. There have been years they have been so close. Last year, when the ratings were called out it was the first time since 1988 or 1989 that it happened for this band (getting overall superior). The All-Superior rating was icing on the cake. That is all the kids talked about."

Wilbanks couldn't participate in a band until he transferred to Kossuth High for his 11th-grade year. He said his "late start" motivated him and that he had great mentors who helped him experience a "sense of family" that a band develops.

Wilbanks' ties to music grew stronger as he earned degrees in music education at NEMCC and the University of Mississippi. He also earned a specialty degree in administration from Arkansas State University.

Wilbanks praised the Caledonia community for its support of the band, and admitted there are businesses he didn't even know were in town that have provided amazing assistance.

Caledonia High Principal Gregory Elliott said Wilbanks' hard work has been noticed.

“Mr. Wilbanks is an amazing teacher, and an even better person,” Elliott said. “He teaches with enthusiasm and expects his students to perform at their highest possible level. Mr. Wilbanks has made the Caledonia High School band one of the best bands in the state.

“Mr. Wilbanks has a wonderful rapport with both the co-workers and students at Caledonia High. As a band director, his job requires compassion and patience. He has shown an ability to connect with his students, which allows him to maintain a positive classroom environment. Mr. Wilbanks has a talent for teaching simple musical concepts as well as concepts that are more advanced. Mr. Wilbanks’ students have consistently shown growth and are always well prepared for performances and competitions. I believe Mr. Wilbanks is the best band director in the state of Mississippi.”

Wilbanks credits assistant band director Angelina Neal and choir director Rachel Coleman for their work in helping to make Caledonia High a band school. He said it is challenging having to wear so many hats – and that sometimes being a band director feels like he is a dancing bear – but he said his goal is to create a nurturing environment where the integrity of the music is maintained in rehearsals.

Before or after those rehearsals or performances, the band may use video to improve. Wilbanks also relies on student leaders, who provide an extra set of eyes to look for specific things. The leaders for the band’s 11 sections increase the students’ sense of ownership in what they’re doing and strengthen the bonds that help the team come together when it performs.

“The kids have to enjoy it,” Wilbanks said. “This is an elective. They choose to be here, so they need to want to be here. You have to have fun with the kids. You have to pick music they’re going to enjoy and

also pick things that are going to be meaningful and where they're going to learn."