What’s Your Story?

All of us are constantly called upon to defend our music programs. Demands for “metrics” and “deliverables” require us to share the best and most reliable advocacy data available. SBO Magazine frequently features that sort of information and there are many advocacy organizations, most notably NAfME, the National Band Association, and the American String Teachers Association, that have put together terrifically researched and packaged products to help you make your case.

As a senior leader in U.S. military music, many Congressional staffers, Pentagon officials, and media members had me on speed dial. The conversations often started with their breathless excitement at having found the solution to budgetary problems – cut military music!!! Inevitably their hopes were dashed when they discovered that the entire budget for music was a zero followed by many more zeros and then a one as a percentage of the federal budget.

The truth is, while we must always be prepared to “show the data,” in some cases, they’ve already decided that we’re not relevant. So, in addition to providing advocacy facts and figures, we each need to have a story. After more than 37 years in uniform, I have many memorable moments to recall. Here are three of them.

I was conducting an Army band at a middle of the night troop homecoming (they are always in the middle of the night). Many Soldiers had family members there to greet them. As we were leaving (to climb back into our beds), one young Private who was alone came up and said, “Thanks for being here, when I came down the aircraft stairs and the band was playing, it made me feel like a hero.” Doesn’t every young American who volunteers to defend our Nation deserve to feel like a hero? Think about it - why does everyone want us at football games and other athletic events? The football coach probably doesn’t have to provide metrics to defend having a team. So why do they need us to inspire, excite, and entertain the crowd? Because live music “activates” a part of the brain, triggering the powerful emotions that nothing else can (not even a thrilling touchdown drive). My favorite professional football team is in Washington, D.C. (I do enjoy suffering…). A touchdown in their stadium is exciting, but when 80,000 people stand and sing “Hail to the Redskins” with their band, that sends a thrill down your spine. Only music can do that.

A dear friend of mine, Colonel (Retired) Finley Hamilton died not long after retiring as Commander of The U.S. Army Field Band. As I walked with his widow to the gravesite at Arlington National Cemetery and we heard the band, she turned to me and smiled and said, “Finley would love this!” Wouldn’t all of us like to feel that kind of joy at what normally is a sad event? Only music can do that.

A few years ago, I had finished a concert with The U.S. Army Field Band in a packed gymnasium in Nebraska, far out on the prairie where the concert attendance was more than the town’s population. After every concert, we would be at the exits to thank the audience for coming. As the crowd dispersed, a man pulled me aside to meet his wife. He said, “Six months ago our son was killed in Afghanistan. Tonight, we started to heal.” Only music can do that.

So, have your facts ready, but be able to tell your story too. The student who struggled to find a place in school but found it in the bandroom. The Title I school whose orchestra is the glue that holds the community together. Maybe you haven’t been at it long enough to see these small miracles. Ask yourself why you are a music educator. What moments inspired you? What’s your story?

Colonel (Retired) Thomas Palmatier served over 37 years in America’s Army culminating as Leader and Commander of The U. S Army Band “Pershing’s Own.” He is active as a clinician, guest conductor, speaker, and consultant. Is there something you’d like discussed in future columns? Contact him at www.ThomasPalmatier.com.