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East Carolina University News Bureau
E-mail to durhamj@ecu.edu  Web site at http://www.news.ecu.edu
252-328-6481 FAX: 252-328-6300
East Carolina's traveling band

By Kim Grizzard
The Daily Reflector

Thursday, January 01, 2009

While some of the Pirates taking the field at today's Liberty Bowl spent Tuesday night in Memphis at a Grizzlies basketball game, others were sitting on a bus at Love's Fuel Center, off Interstate 40 near Marion.

The road to Memphis was a long and sometimes bumpy one for nearly 250 students who traded part of their Christmas break for playing in a traveling band. Members of the East Carolina University Marching Pirates took a 15-hour bus ride to play in today’s 50th AutoZone Liberty Bowl, where ECU will take on the University of Kentucky.

“We are past tired,” Tremayne Smith, a junior from Salisbury who is the band’s head drum major, said in a telephone interview from Memphis.

“(But) I don’t mind it one bit,” Smith said. “I love band … and the whole atmosphere we’re going into here playing at the bowl.”

To get there, band members packed their gloves, hats and plumes and boarded one of five chartered buses that left Greenville shortly after 8 p.m. Tuesday. Smith joined the band about midnight in a Lowe’s parking lot in Greensboro, one of four passenger pick-ups buses made as they crossed the state and headed toward Tennessee. A truckload of equipment was sent ahead on Monday to carry drums, tubas, flags and a portable sound system that the band, cheerleaders, mascot and cannon crew would need for marching in Memphis.

“I think that a lot of people, when they go to a college football game, it’s a given that the band will be there and the cheerleaders are on the sideline,” said Chris Knighten, a professor in the ECU School of Music and director of the Marching Pirates. “I think a lot of people don’t think about what it takes to get the spirit groups to an event.”

For the Marching Pirates, it took a $100,000 travel budget and one faculty member. While head coach Susie Glynn is responsible for the cheerleaders, Knighten is the lone leader of the band, a single chaperone for more than 200 college students on a five-day field trip.

Knighten, who is in his 16th year at ECU, said band members are notorious for staying in line.

“We stop at malls to eat,” he said, laughing. “You know, at a mall entrance there are four to five sets of glass doors. One person will walk in the front and the whole band will walk through that one door. Even in college, they automatically do that. They’re used to being in line. That’s just what we do.”

Keeping the band in step during road games to Charlotte, Raleigh and Charlottesville, Va., is one thing, but regrouping members from 17 states in the middle of a semester break requires more complex choreography.

“We haven’t seen the band since we found out we were going to Memphis,” Knighten said. “All of the correspondence with our students has been done via e-mail.”

Band members like Marie Henry, a senior from Maryland, drove back to North Carolina to board a bus for an overnight trip to Tennessee. Others, like Krista Rosendahl, a junior from Florida, made their own arrangements to meet in Memphis.

Rosendahl spent Christmas break with her family in West Palm Beach, where she welcomed a new niece
before flying out to perform at the bowl game.

“\textbf{I used to be in the Coast Guard,}” said Rosendahl, 36. “My family’s used to when you make a commitment, you follow through all the way. When I joined the band, that meant I followed the band.”

ECU teaching assistant Jesse Rackley followed the band to Memphis as well, boarding a bus in Greenville 10 days after his wedding. Still, Rackley, whose wife is a band director in Rocky Mount, was glad for the chance to go to the Liberty Bowl.

“Our only other options (for a bowl game) were the day of the wedding,” he said, laughing.

Knighten said the lengths that members have gone to just to get to Memphis is a testimony to their tenacity.

“It says a lot about the students’ dedication to what they do,” he said. “These students are not required to be in band; they take this as an elective. In addition to six to 10 hours of practice a week, they’re also traveling and giving up open weekends.”

The band, the largest student organization on the ECU campus, represents about 1 percent of the student body.

“It’s a really big cross section from all the different schools within the university and almost every department,” Knighten said. “The one thing they have in common is they love to perform and they all love the Pirates.”
ECU grad gets $365,000 from Oprah for his school

From Staff and Wire Reports

Wednesday, December 31, 2008

ATLANTA — A letter from Oprah Winfrey seemed like the world's best Christmas present — until teacher Ron Clark noticed an extra piece of paper flutter out of the envelope.

That's when the Atlanta educator and East Carolina University graduate saw the check for the innovative private school he opened in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods in 2007. It was, quite literally, an answer to a prayer.

"On Christmas Eve, I was the only one at the school," Clark, a 1997 ECU graduate, said in a telephone interview Wednesday with The Daily Reflector. "There was a check for $365,000.

"We teach school all day and fundraise at night," Clark said. "To have an unsolicited gift come like that is incredible."

Clark surprised his students with the news of the donation Wednesday morning in a gathering at the south Atlanta school. The children, parents and teachers erupted in deafening cheers when he showed off the check.

Several cried at the news.

"Everything they learn is enhanced because of the teachers' dedication and creativity," said a tearful Gloria Nesmith, whose son, Cameron, is a fifth-grader at the academy. "And Oprah noticed. I'm just overwhelmed."

In her letter to Clark, Winfrey applauds the "profound difference you're making with your passion for teaching."

"I always knew you had a special gift and you're using it to the highest calling," the letter reads. "You are a dynamic and powerful role model for what education can be."

The check was issued by the Oprah Winfrey Foundation, which gave $4 million to educational programs in 2008, said foundation executive director Caren Yanis.

Clark said Winfrey called him at school on Tuesday, and the two of them talked about his school and the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls, which Winfrey opened in 2006 in South Africa.

Clark has appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" twice — once when he was named Disney American Teacher of the Year in 2000 and again when his book, "The Essential 55," made the New York Times best-seller list.

Until this week, Clark had not spoken to Winfrey since 2003, but he has continued to send her updates on the progress of his school. Clark said he has never asked the celebrity talk show host for a donation, though a number of people have suggested that he should.

"Everybody said 'Just call Oprah,'" Clark said, recalling a time when he was working to raise $3.5 million to renovate a former factory in south Atlanta that would become Ron Clark Academy. "I said, 'I'm not asking her for anything.' Then all of a sudden, I got the check."

The donation, which likely will go to scholarships for students, would pay for 26 children to attend the school for one year, Clark said. The 80-student middle school depends almost entirely on donations to operate. Clark and his students drew national media attention during the presidential election when a video of the
students performing a political rap they wrote grabbed the public's attention on YouTube. The children ended up performing the rap, called "Vote However U Like," on national TV shows including CNN and BET.

Teachers at the school frequently use rapping, dancing and drumming to help students learn. More than 3,000 teachers from around the world traveled to Atlanta last year to train with Clark and his co-founder, Kim Bearden.

Clark, a former North Carolina Teaching Fellow, began his career in Aurora before moving to New York to take a job in an inner-city school. In 2006, his experience teaching in Harlem was the subject of a made-for-TV movie, "The Ron Clark Story," starring Matthew Perry.
Delta Theta Sigma fraternity brothers prepare to hunt deer on Penn State farm land in State College, Pa. The fraternity processes its own deer meat.
AP Photo by Carolyn Kaster

Ryan Bostdorf of Delta Theta Sigma, a fraternity that helps students from rural areas adjust to college life, looks for deer.
AP Photo by Carolyn Kaster

Books and bucks

Agricultural fraternity at Penn State hunts and processes its own deer while members work on college educations

GENARO C. ARMAS, The Associated Press
Comment on this story

Pictures of former fraternity brothers line a wall, and empty soda and beer cartons are stacked near the back door. It’s like any other college fraternity house -- except for the deer carcass hanging in the front hall.

Welcome to hunting season at Delta Theta Sigma, an agricultural fraternity at Penn State where students keep a daily tally of deer kills on a calendar hung just outside the kitchen.

"The mailman hates us at this time of year," Dan Vastyan said as he worked one night this
week to skin the deer hanging just inside the front door. The bloody mess had to be cleaned up by morning so the mail carrier could get through.

It's the same drill every late fall for the fraternity in State College, centrally located in hunting-happy Pennsylvania. Nearly 1 million hunters were believed to have taken to the woods on the opening day of rifle deer season, always the Monday after Thanksgiving, and more than 300,000 deer were expected to be killed over the span of two weeks.

"For anybody who's an avid hunter, this is like Christmastime for us," said Alex Potosky, the chapter's vice president.

Except that's not mistletoe hanging in the doorway. It's a deer carcass.

Fraternity members killed five on the first day of hunting season. Many members are avid hunters who hail from rural areas and are majoring in an agricultural field. Some say they seek out the organization because they don't initially feel comfortable at the school where the enrollment tops 40,000.

Members say they form bonds that go beyond hunting, but rifle season is special because the venison will help feed the 17 men who live in the house, plus 10 "little sisters" who live elsewhere but enjoy many of the same privileges as members.

Fraternity brothers prepare and process their own meat and store it in one of the house's seven chest freezers. An average-size deer might yield about 65 pounds of meat.

"We definitely don't starve, but we work on a pretty modest budget, so anything we can do to offset that cost really helps," Potosky said.

House cook Angie Lucas whips up weekday meals for the fraternity brothers. Her favorite recipes include pot pie and venison stroganoff.

"Sometimes you look in the refrigerator, and you never know what you are going to find," Lucas said.

But getting deer meat to the cooking stage is a messy process, one shared by all members when a deer is hauled in.

One day that week, Vastyan and Tom Kirby busily skinned and quartered a kill. Then, Joe Stoner, still decked out in camouflage, barreled through the door carrying his own deer, a bit smaller than Vastyan's prize.

Flopping the carcass onto the laminate floor, the brothers exchanged stories, sounding like old friends telling tall tales around a campfire.

"I wasn't shooting for this one; I missed the big one!" Stoner said. "If it weren't for a branch, I would have had a lot bigger one."

Vastyan and Kirby worked on their deer, hung from a ceiling hook. Its body was cut in half at the midsection. A last-second move by the deer caused Vastyan's rifle shot to hit the deer's hind leg, shattering the back half.

Nearby, Stoner and two friends worked on another deer, crackling off bones and getting the body ready for butchering.

The fraternity has been cited by the university and its agriculture school for its academic performance and community service. It advertises itself during rush season more as a small "family" than as a fraternity, Potosky said.

"These people are like real brothers, not just frat brothers," Kirby said. "I wouldn't be in college still if I hadn't been here."
Until rifle season ended on Dec. 13, the fraternity members spent time processing and storing venison brought in by brothers, plus deer donated by alumni.

They'll stock up on venison burgers, stew and other goodies. By February, the repetitive diet has some members ready to shake up the menu.

The freezer also contains beef and pork donated by alumni or bought from farmers. The only store-bought meat in the house is chicken.

Even with all the venison in the house and fraternity brothers working frantically on the deer in the hall, the dinner menu one night this week was anything but expected: chicken stir fry.

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