

The Peters Township Meats & Music Spaghetti Dinner – Speech at PMEA 2026

My name is Donna Stark Fox. I taught Orchestra students in the Peters Township School District where I also served for 29 of my 38 years there as co-director of the High School Marching Band. Currently, I serve as an artist lecturer in string methods at Carnegie Mellon University, and I serve as a supervisor of Student Teachers at Duquesne University, where I host the annual Pittsburgh High Note Festival. At Peters, I worked with Dr. Robert Dell and for the last 43 years, our panel coordinator Paul Fox and I have co-directed the South Hills Junior Orchestra. In each of these groups I have worked closely with a booster organization.

The focus of my topic here today, is about a fundraising experience that brought in more than funding for trips. It created a unique synergy.

Back in the late 1990's or early 2000's, a couple who were band parents in Peters program approached us with an idea to hold a spaghetti dinner. They had experience in such ventures through their church and volunteered to steer the project.

The first dinner was held on a Saturday evening in January...during a snowstorm. We had set up for a few small performances, and as many tables as were permitted in the church social hall. The kitchen crew prepared to serve the guests and 300 people showed up to eat, listen and enjoy. At that first event there were also two or three baskets for a silent auction. It was great success, and it was decided that we should do it again the next year and 600 guests appeared, and a few more baskets were added to the silent auction.

It became obvious to all involved that we needed more space. Since renovation at the High School had been completed, we approached the High School Administration and asked if we could use the cafeteria...and the kitchen. We were told an employee from the kitchen would have to be hired, but we already knew that we had a booster parent who worked in the kitchen and she volunteered her services.

The success of the first two events had gained the attention of band parents who were not members of the booster organization, as well making an impression on some parents from Chorus and Orchestra, who thought the boosters were only there for the band.

At the High School, we set up a few larger performance groups, and the crowd ate their meal, sat and listened, but reluctantly vacated their chairs so those who waiting in line could come and eat.

At the end of that 3rd year the original chairpersons stepped down, a new chair stepped up, and some strategic major decisions were made by the newly formed committee. First the event would be named *"MEATBALLS AND MUSIC."*

Next, since music department trips were for members of all band, orchestra and choral ensembles, it was decided that any student in the department who met the three conditions would be eligible to receive funding.

The first condition required every student to presell ten tickets allowing planners to project supplies needed and also allow for walk-ins.

The second condition was that all participating students were expected to sign in and work the event by serving food, bussing tables, setting up performances moving equipment and most importantly being there for clean up at the end of the event.

The third condition was that all students were expected to perform with their ensemble(s).

When you have an army of 250 students and their 500+ parents all showing up to work the event amazing things start to happen.

Suddenly we were anticipating 1500 to 2000 guests. With such large crowds expected, it was obvious that we need to turn tables quickly, so we moved dessert and all performances to the gym. The athletic director granted our wish a to use that space as long as we covered the gym floor with butcher paper. A truck load of 6 foot and 8 foot tables was delivered to the high school from every building in the district. The tables were set up on the floor in front of the bleachers for dessert and coffee. The bleachers were opened for anyone who wanted to stay through the event and the they were filled to capacity. It became a “must attend event for the greater community.”

One of major plusses in *Meatballs and Music* was that basket raffle which grew from those first 3 baskets to more than 120 by 2013. Funds received from the raffle were clear profit since everything was donated by local vendors. It took scores of people to acquire and prepare all these items, and this became an engaging commitment. In 2019, word was that they had increased to 157 baskets to raffle!

When I left the district, the gross receipts (including the presale) were \$50,000, with the net after expenses at \$33,000, PLUS the gross on the baskets, which was \$10,000. Funds would be available to students who met the three conditions and eventually the boosters created an option for a student to benefit if they could not be present at the event. This involved an application and an essay.

While Meatballs and Music thrives to this day, one of the most gratifying changes that I saw was parents jumping to their feet for every ensemble. It was even more exciting to see the bleachers filled with parents who stayed to hear groups that were not just the ones in which their children performed. Parents bonded in a common mission and were now looking at the good the “band” boosters did for every student in the Music Department, regardless of the ensemble. In 2013, the Band Boosters changed the name to MUSIC BOOSTERS and applied to become a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization.

Meatballs and Music has become a grand tradition and the community support is huge. Parents and their children also bonded in a common mission to support musicians and their music throughout the Music Department. The impact of harmonious engagement at the upper level sifted downward to parents whose children were embarking on new music adventures in 4th grade where they could elect to play instrument and sing in chorus.

I believe that the benefits of this engagement and the synergy it created, cultivated a grass roots advocacy that strengthened the opportunity for all students, and allowed the value of music learning to reach deeper into the community.

All participating parents are justifiably proud of Meatballs and Music.