

An interview with the Optimists Alumni's Doug Darwin

# Toronto Optimists Alumni turn SoundSport group into Mummers-costumed world travelers

by Steve Vickers, Publisher (publisher@drumcorpsworld.com), photos courtesy of Bob Carell

I've known Doug Darwin (*right and below left*) for quite a few years, first through his direction of the Kiwanis Cavaliers and, more recently, through his involvement with the Toronto Optimists Alumni Drum Corps. The organization has a long history that dates back to the late 1950s and has now turned into an internationally-traveled group of musicians.



The group has made two trips to South Korea for performances, linked to a number of young people who came to Canada and marched with the Kitchener corps during their time competing in Drum Corps International's World Class.

Keeping any type of drum corps operating in our neighboring country to the north has become increasingly difficult, but the loyal members and supporters of the activity have rallied together to maintain the viability of the rare organization in a province that once boasted dozens of corps that competed in up to five different divisions from prep to seniors.

I wanted to find out more about the evolution of the Optimists Alumni and how the connection with South Korea developed.

**Steve Vickers:** Right off the bat, tell me about your introduction to and involvement in the drum and bugle corps activity.

**Doug Darwin:** I started drum corps back in September 1969 with the Scarborough Firefighters (*below, Facebook*) feeder corps, The Sparkies. I played snare my first year and continued on until 1974 with the Etobicoke Crusaders then Oakland Crusaders for the next three years on toms.

My last marching year was 1977.

After that I taught percussion, wrote charts, judged and then eventually took on the directors role in 1989 with the Kiwanis Cavaliers (*right, 2000, Dan Scafidi*). I did that until we folded in 2005. Over the years I have sat on several boards and committees, was president of the

Ontario Drum Corps Association and was an executive board member of Drum Corps International.

In 2006 I spent the year with The Cadets, then in 2007 helped Dutch Boy until we regrouped and I have been director of the Northstar Youth until now.

**SV:** You were director of the Kiwanis Cavaliers, one of the last DCI-competitive corps in Ontario. When did you become involved with the





## Optimists Alumni in Toronto?

**DD:** I actually got involved with the Optimists Alumni while running the Kavaliers. I worked on a TV commercial for the Ontario government and used the Optimists Alumni in the marketing and promotion for the Lottery Corporation. The Kavaliers



(Top to bottom): 1958, 1961 off the line at Windsor, ONT, and Don Daber with a member of the Toronto Optimists at the corps' clubhouse working on an issue of the *Green Capsule Comments* newsletter.



performed the music for the commercial, but were too young to do the live gigs.

A few years later, the Optimists Alumni director and great friend Ric Brown (right) said the corps was doing a parade in our community and I asked him if he would like to have a color guard in front of them. It was a great opportunity for our Northstar winter guard to do something in the summer months and we added color to their marching group. It was perfect.

The kids had fun and Optimists Alumni members were very grateful and supportive of our kids. We then agreed to do a few shows with them and for the next few years we did summer events with the Optimists Alumni.

How I ended up marching is a funny story that might take some time. However, I am proud to play with everyone in the group, especially Lorne Ferrazutti (middle right) and Barry Bell (bottom right).

These two guys are icons in the activity and are the best people you could ever meet.

**SV:** Give me some background on the Optimists Alumni -- when was the group formed, what types of activities have they participated in over the years and how did the corps transition from a traditional look with cadet uniforms into what the corps is

now using for "uniforms"?

**DD:** Optimists Alumni was formed in October 2002 to perform at the Great Alliance of Seniors (G.A.S.) Reunion in Hamilton, ONT. That was in May 2004. It was originally formed for the single performance, however, it was such great fun they continued on.

By 2015, we realized we had to do something different to keep the members interested. Many were getting older and were unable to physically march, others were falling off because of the rehearsal expectations needed to field a drill show.

I had been involved with the Prime Time Brass for a couple of years and at Mardi Gras we had borrowed Mumpers costumes from Barry Woods. Barry had a strong relationship with the Mumpers and obviously with





the drum corps activity. I suggested that we consider showcasing the talent we had, keep as many members involved as much as possible and entertain the audiences.

Optimists Alumni (below, 2013, Aurora, ONT, Santa Claus Parade, Eric McConachie) decided to rent the Mummers costumes and redesign our entertainment package for the summer of 2016. The group went on to compete and win gold at the DCI SoundSport Championships in Indianapolis, IN, back in



August 2016.

**SV:** Turning to the South Korea connection, what are the roots of the link to that country in the Far East involving members coming to Canada to march?

**DD:** As the director of the Cavaliers, I had been

connected to South Korea through my friend, Ed Choi. He was a Canadian-Korean who had a long history in the drum corps activity here in Canada and the U.S, however, was living and teaching in South Korea. Over the years that relationship grew and the Cavaliers welcomed many members from Korea into the corps and we built a strong relationship with the Yum Kwang High School in Seoul.

**SV:** Describe how the two trips for Optimists Alumni across the Pacific Ocean came about, how was it financed or sponsored and how big a group traveled there.

**DD:** A video from the 2016 SoundSport performance was brought to the attention of the Jeju International Wind Ensemble Festival and a subsequent invitation to attend was presented to me by my wife to perform there in August 2017. Our members were unanimous in their agreement to attend and so the first tour was planned and successfully staged.

We laid out the first tour to include some shows in Seoul, South Korea, as well as the Festival on Jeju Island. Each trip cost members about \$3,000 Canadian, which covered all of our four flights and a significant portion for buses, meals and hotels.

The balance was financed through funding by the Optimists Alumni from their performances and tour sponsorships from both the Jeju Festival and Yamaha in South Korea. For the 2017 tour, we took 32 people and the 2019 tour group totaled 34 people.

**SV:** Who are the key individuals keeping the Optimists Alumni moving forward as far as instructors and managers are concerned?

**DD:** The board is led by (top to bottom) Mike Lang, Rick Lang, Matt Davis, Soo Lee and Barry Woods. Dave MacKinnon (left) and I write the charts.

Current members remember Don Daber's influence and the effect he had on the entire drum corps movement. The tradition of the corps' newsletter, *Green Capsule Comments*, has carried into the







alumni corps' current operations. Who among your membership has kept the newsletters going? (Top and bottom, 2019 performances in South Korea)

**DD:** I was never in the Optimists when I was younger, however, some of my best friends were members and I always had access to the Toronto Optimists' newsletter, *Green Capsule Comments* which detailed through photos and articles exactly what was happening with the corps.



Honestly, I was envious! Later, as director of the Kavaliers, I employed Don to assist in our promotional materials and even the corps' logo. He truly was a unique individual.

The Optimists Alumni were fortunate to have member Bob Carell (above right) create and maintain our renowned open access Web site. From this outlet came the re-launching of the *Green Capsule Comments* (left) newsletter that



involved both Bob's writing skills and the photographs and video contributions from alumni members David Johns (right) and Eric McConachie (above left). Together they were instrumental in presenting the quality and tradition of the organization's history. We're proud to salute these members on their well-deserved retirements.

**SV:** What are future plans for the Optimists Alumni?

**DD:** We are all now dealing with this terrible virus and our plans for a summer to tour out to California have been put on hold this year. Originally we were going to head west June 17 and return to Toronto June 29. For now, we are holding tight. Self-isolation and taking care of our loved ones is the most important task we have. Hopefully we will all get through this, learn from it and prepare for a great year of parades, performances and a trip to California in 2021.

**SV:** Thanks for sharing the details about the survival and forward-thinking of the corps. My best as the Optimists Alumni continue entertaining around the "world!" ■ ■ ■

