

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF STATE  
HIGH SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS



## NEWS RELEASE

### Alabama Marching Band and Band Director Selected as National Recipients of NFHS National High School Heart of the Arts Award

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: John Gillis

INDIANAPOLIS, IN (March 8, 2016) — The Midland City (Alabama) Dale County High School Marching Band and Band Director Sherri Miller have been selected the 2016 national recipients of the “National High School Heart of the Arts Award” by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS).

The National High School Heart of the Arts Award was created by the NFHS to recognize those individuals who exemplify the ideals of the positive heart of the arts that represent the core mission of education-based activities. This is the third year that the National High School Heart of the Arts Award has been offered.

Located in what is known as “The Wireglass” in southern Alabama, Dale County High School is an Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA) Class 3A high school located in rural Midland City.

Dale County’s 60-member school band selflessly took it upon itself to support a county rival neighboring school – Skipperville’s G.W. Long High School – during the 2015 AHSAA football playoffs. Long High School does not have a band.

The Dale County Marching Warriors Band raised its own funds and traveled more than 250 miles to its rival’s quarterfinal football game at Flomaton, which Long won, 35-21. The band, under the direction of Sherri Miller, inspired the Rebels’ fans with their music and also played at halftime.

The following week, Dale County’s band traveled to Elba for Long High School’ semifinal game. Although Long fell to eventual Class 2A champion Elba, 24-7, Dale County played Long’s fight song

following the loss. The Long football players, students and parents joined together to thank the Dale County Marching Band members.

While Dale County's selfless acts of kindness were in and of themselves impressive, the story goes beyond that.

During the past eight years, Dale County High School and G.W. Long High School have endured an enormous number of tragic losses.

Among them, Dale County Head Football Coach Todd Horne was killed in a car accident on U.S. Highway 231 a month before the 2008 football season was to begin. Todd Horne was the older brother of current G.W. Long Head Football Coach Scott Horne.

In January 2013, longtime Dale County Public Schools bus driver Charles Poland gave up his life to protect a busload of children when a mentally disturbed war veteran attempted to take them hostage.

In January 2015, the school's then-new band director, Sean Miller, was killed in a car accident less than a mile from the school on the same U.S. Highway 231 where Todd Horne was killed.

Then, in June 2015, G.W. Long Assistant Coach and former Auburn University/Daleville High School football star James Kiger was killed when his truck overturned just a few miles from where Todd Horne was killed.

Miller's wife Sherri – who had been his band assistant – was asked in February 2015 to take over the position of band director. Sherri and Sean had one child at the time and were expecting their second child in July. Her band students immediately showered her with love and continue to do so today.

In each of the above instances, this small county made up of small towns and many even smaller communities rallied to provide support for the many families who were suffering with candlelight vigils and prayer rallies, among other expressions of love. Miller says her family and she were indeed one of those families.

"I don't know what I would have done without the support of my Dale County High School family and the surrounding community," Miller said. "They really embraced me and helped me find a way to keep going."

That was why Miller responded to a request from a friend about providing the Dale County band for the G.W. Long football playoff games. She wanted to give back. So did her band students.

She also remembered her husband's challenge to each student. Sean Miller attended Troy (Alabama) University, where he participated in the university's nationally acclaimed "Sound of the South" marching band. According to Sherri, "My husband loved music, knew the healing power of music,

and the importance of 'family' when it came to his band members. He would often tell his students, 'Every time you play a piece of music, play it like it might be your last time.' He looked at music as a gift that could lift the spirits of those who listened."

Miller was struggling with the upcoming Thanksgiving holidays as she moved forward without her husband. However, she said she gained tremendous comfort from a most unsuspecting place.

"I was at the cemetery visiting my husband's grave," she began. "I was really hurting. I got word that the funds had been raised for our band to travel to the Flomaton game and I was so proud. Then, I looked at the tombstone right behind my husband's grave and it was Coach Todd Horne's. I didn't realize they were in the same cemetery, much less so close together. I felt the connection and a peace came over me, and I knew God was telling me everything was going to be okay.

"Our band kids are very special. They wanted to share their love for music – wanted to give back. They are such a great group of kids."

#### About the Award

In addition to the selection of the Midland City (Alabama) Dale County High School Marching Band and Band Director Sherri Miller as the national award recipients, the NFHS National High School Heart of the Arts Award Selection Committee chose eight individuals for section awards. Following are the 2016 National High School Heart of the Arts section winners:

Section 1 – Kaleigh Hunt, student, Ellicottville (New York) High School

Section 2 – Marisa DeFranco, student, Arlington (Virginia) Wakefield High School

Section 3 – The Midland City (Alabama) Dale County High School Marching Band and Band Director Sherri Miller, Midland City, Alabama

Section 4 – Gabe Stanforth, student, Taylor Ridge (Illinois) Rockridge High School

Section 5 – Ethan Och, student, Swanville (Minnesota) High School, and Gina Christopherson, former band director, Swanville (Minnesota) High School

Section 6 – Van (Texas) High School Academics Team

Section 7 – Kelsie Albee, student, Manti (Utah) High School

Section 8 – Mikayla Heston, student, Gresham (Oregon) Sam Barlow High School

Nominations for this award were generated through NFHS member state associations and reviewed by the NFHS National High School Heart of the Arts Award Selection Committee composed of state association staff members. While the national winner will be recognized June 29 at the NFHS Summer Meeting in Reno, Nevada, the section winners will be recognized within their respective states and will receive awards before the end of the current school year.

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#### About the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS)

The NFHS, based in Indianapolis, Indiana, is the national leadership organization for high school sports and fine arts activities. Since 1920, the NFHS has led the development of education-based interscholastic sports and fine arts activities that help students succeed in their lives. The NFHS sets direction for the future by building awareness and support, improving the participation experience, establishing consistent standards and rules for competition, and helping those who oversee high school sports and activities. The NFHS writes playing rules for 16 sports for boys and girls at the high school level. Through its 50 member state associations and the District of Columbia, the NFHS reaches more than 19,000 high schools and 11 million participants in high school activity programs, including more than 7.8 million in high school sports. As the recognized national authority on interscholastic activity programs, the NFHS conducts national meetings; sanctions interstate events; produces publications for high school coaches, officials and athletic directors; sponsors professional organizations for high school coaches, officials, spirit coaches, speech and debate coaches and music adjudicators; serves as the national source for interscholastic coach training; and serves as a national information resource of interscholastic athletics and activities. For more information, visit the NFHS Web site at [www.nfhs.org](http://www.nfhs.org).

MEDIA CONTACT:                 John Gillis, 317-972-6900  
  National Federation of State High School Associations  
  PO Box 690, Indianapolis, Indiana 46206  
  [jgillis@nfhs.org](mailto:jgillis@nfhs.org)