



Brett Bassham, Brad Brewer, Chris Nugent, Spencer Sandy, Ty Damron

HONOR AND TRADITION

The Jonesboro Firefighters Pipes and Drums

BY AUDREY HANES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MELISSA DONNER

Fifteen years ago, Jonesboro Fire Department's Ty Damron brought a longstanding tradition to the city's fire department when he founded Jonesboro Firefighters Pipes and Drums, the first of its kind in the state of Arkansas. Today, the seven-member group is in high demand for public performances and for honoring loved ones at funerals and memorials, particularly within the public safety community.

The tradition of bagpipes and firefighters dates back to the after-effects of the Irish Potato Famine in the mid-1800s, causing an influx of Irish immigrants to the United States. Many of them turned to public safety jobs because that was one of the only jobs available to them, at a time where being a firefighter was an extremely dangerous and often fatal occupation. Many Irish firefighters died on the job, and because there were so many instances of bagpipes being played at an Irish firefighter's funeral, the Irish tradition became synonymous with firefighters and eventually public safety.

Damron, a captain and longtime firefighter with the Jonesboro Fire Department, first got his start playing bagpipes with a group called Northeast Arkansas Caledonian Pipes and Drums. He brought his love for the tradition to the Jonesboro Fire Department (JFD) in 2008 when he founded the Jonesboro Firefighters Pipes and Drums (Pipes and Drums). Several members have come and gone over the years, but today, under the added leadership of Assistant Chief Brett Bassham, the group is made up of seven members and is training several more. Joining Damron and Bassham on the bagpipes is Korley Martin, while Drum Sergeant Spencer Sandy, Chris Nugent, Marty Hamrick and Brad Brewer make up the drum section.

"One of the things we take pride in is that we were the first fire (department) based band in the state of Arkansas, and we really are the only one within the Nashville-St. Louis-Texas-Oklahoma area," said Bassham, who originally graduated from Arkansas State University with a degree in computer science before deciding to dedicate his life to public safety 16 years ago.

Damron originally convinced Bassham to learn the difficult instrument and join Pipes and Drums in 2013; he spent eight years practicing the bagpipes before taking on the role of pipe major in 2021.

The group practices every three weeks and plays between 60 and 100 times a year. While the majority of their appearances are at funerals and memorial services for those in the public safety field, they also regularly play for fundraisers, parades and other public events.

"Ty really laid the foundation and set the standard for our music," said Bassham. "The songs we pick are ones we can play ourselves and within the state band, the Arkansas Firefighters Pipes and Drums. By learning the same music as the other groups, called massed band sets, we are all able to play together, like at the annual Firefighter Memorial in Little Rock. I have played in five different states. For instance, the band joined in with other groups in Memphis last summer for a firefighter who was killed, and we all knew the same tunes."

The group's founding member and current pipe sergeant says that the addition in leadership has been great as the group continues to evolve 15 years in.

"We enjoy helping people; we have servant hearts," said Damron. "The guys who come in and join the fire department enjoy helping people, and it really is cool to be a fireman. We have great equipment, and the band is an extension of that. We have been blessed to be able to learn one of the hardest instruments to learn how to play, and it's been cool for us to share that and share in the heritage of it. I enjoy being a part of that."

"We are approaching the 15-year mark of Jonesboro Firefighters Pipes and Drums. It's been a blessing to me to have a kid remember us playing in a family member's funeral 15 years ago. It's a rare service, but it's special to me that we are who they call for that – that's how it is in our area. I've been sent all over the country to different trainings and experienced things I would not have had the opportunity to do otherwise; with the bagpipes over my shoulder as a firefighter, I've been able to add more to that."

The group has placed great importance on giving back to the community, helping to raise many thousands of dollars by performing at events and fundraisers for local nonprofit organizations.

"We try to stay with local, small organizations," said Bassham of the nonprofits they support. "We have played for ShareHope, Beck Pride Center, Pregnancy Resource Center, lots of groups like that. We want (to help) local groups that affect the local community that don't have the funding like some of the national nonprofit organizations do. We have also done a fundraiser for Camp Sunshine, which is a summer camp for children who are burn victims here in the state of Arkansas."

The pipe major says that the community can continue to support them with funding, as well.

"Come out for our fundraisers – that's always the biggest thing," said Bassham. "We raise money so we can operate, but we also try to give back. Jonesboro firemen through the years have signed up for payroll deduction, so we typically can support ourselves, so please support us when we are out doing our fundraising for other organizations. The fire department really does support us not only financially, but they work for us and fill in if we have to go play a funeral."



Ty Damron





Brett Bassham, Brad Brewer, Chris Nugent, Spencer Sandy, Ty Damron

“We have really become a staple for many events in the state, like when we played at the Arkansas Fallen Firefighters Memorial on the capital grounds in Little Rock,” added Damron. “The Jonesboro Christmas parade is a really important time for us because all of us get to participate as a group; we are proud to be firemen, and it’s a time for us to celebrate and be proud of that. Last year we won a trophy in the parade.”

Although members don’t have to be firefighters to join the group, only those in the JFD are permitted to wear the official Pipes and Drums garb, which has a meaningful and purposeful history specifically tailored to the Pipes and Drums.

“As a service band, as opposed to a civilian band, we wear a traditional military uniform,” said Bassham. “The hat that we wore in the photo is called a balmoral. It is one of three hats that are traditionally worn by pipe bands, the other two being Glengarry and the feather bonnet. The balmoral dates back to the 16th century and is named after Balmoral Castle. The red, wool jacket is called a doublet. The colors of the doublets were chosen to represent our service as firefighters. The color red has a rich history in the fire service, from the color of our rigs to the color of our fire hydrants.

Other details are buttons with ‘F.D.’ and the blue trim that pays homage to the navy blue, class A uniforms worn by our fellow firefighters and honor guard members. The sporran that we wear is a traditional horsehair version that serves the purposes of decoration, a pocket for storage, as well as for modesty while seated.

“Our kilt is tied to County Clare Ireland. The first chief of the Jonesboro Fire Department was a man by the name of L.D. Hickey, and the Hickey name can be traced back to this county. This particular tartan was chosen to pay respect to Chief Hickey as one of the founders and first chief of the department. Many components of the uniform are made from wool, from the balmoral, to the doublet and the kilt. The kilt hose (socks) are no different. The white covers on our shoes are called spats. These, too, are a component of a military uniform; as soldiers navigated muddy fields and forests strewn with briars, they added a level of protection for the shoes that were sometimes hard to come by on the battlefield.”

One such member who began as a member of the community and is now part of the JFD and Pipes and Drums is firefighter and Drum Sergeant Spencer Sandy, who plays snare drum for the group.

“Spencer was a Valley View High School student when he first started playing with us,” said Bassham. “His dad was a volunteer fireman locally, so he got connected with us and started playing with us years ago. He went to ASU, was in the ASU band and stayed on with us, wound up graduating from ASU and then came and joined the fire department. He started with us almost 10 years ago; it’s come full circle.”

The pipers always welcome the chance to teach those who are wanting to learn how to play bagpipes, even if they are outside the JFD.

“I think for Brett and me both, the bagpipes are our sport,” said Damron of their love for the instrument. “We have a lot of people ask us to teach them how to play, and the answer is always, ‘yes,’ if someone is serious about wanting to learn.”

For Bassham, his role and service in Pipes and Drums is something that he takes great pride in, just as he does his role as assistant chief in the JFD.

“(As assistant chief) I don’t get to make the runs anymore,” said Bassham. “My fulfillment comes from providing the guys with the tools that they need, the training that they need and the support they need to go out and actually help people. We have 124 firemen, and they’re the ones who are the hands and feet, they’re out there every day and every night doing all the work. My joy comes from helping those guys do that the best they can.

“... With (Pipes and Drums), what’s most important to me is serving and being able to go out and play at funerals and memorials. It means so much to those families that we are there for their service as they are honoring their loved ones. We do it to be there for those families.”

For more information about Jonesboro Pipes & Drums, find them on Facebook.



Chris Nugent

