

CALEDONIA -- “What’s your why?”

Caledonia High School Band Director Shelby Wilbanks wrote that question on the dry erase board in the band hall earlier this year. His goal was to get each of the 106 band members to look within themselves for the motivation it was going to take to produce Superior results.

The CHS band answered that question in resounding fashion Oct. 12 as it earned overall Superior ratings at the Mississippi High School Activities Association (MHSAA) State Marching Evaluations at Tupelo High. The showing earned the band a spot in the MHSAA Class 4A State Championships at 4:15 p.m. Saturday at Pearl High.

“The kids have to buy into the process,” Wilbanks said. “They picked this year’s show (“Mirror Mirror”), and it was an overwhelmingly popular choice that was more physically demanding than last year’s show, so we knew it would be an issue.”

In 2023, the CHS band also received an overall Superior rating at the MHSAA State Marching Evaluations. At that time, the message Wilbanks put on the dry erase board was focused on changing the culture. He said the band was improving and getting support from the community and everything was growing.

This season, Wilbanks said all aspects of the band have taken a step forward. He said the students’ love for the music and the response they hear from the crowd have fueled their maturation from performances Sept. 28 in Corinth, Oct. 3 at Northeast Mississippi Community College and Oct. 12 in Tupelo.

“They were committed to improving,” Wilbanks said. “They saw they did well at Corinth. We had a different style of judging at Northeast that gave us a lot of beneficial commentary and opened up a lot of issues

that some individuals were not fully committing to all aspects of the show. That's when that full rehearsal week during fall break, a time we called 'Band Camp 2.0', that the really big 'What's your why?' push happened."

Wilbanks said the students' ability to "re-set" and take feedback from drill writer Jay McArthur, who judged the percussion when the band performed at Northeast Mississippi C.C., and implement it into their playing "clicked and lit a fire."

Wilbanks credits the student leadership of the band that features drum majors, section captains and sectional leaders for helping him monitor progress and standards. He said the band "doesn't have a bench," so each student has to hold their peers accountable.

"I have a great group of seniors," Wilbanks said. "This is my first group. This is my seventh year at Caledonia, so it is my first group of seniors that stayed with me, and I wanted to make sure they had a great run. When you hear the crowd response and the kids stand up a little bit taller and they see me smile, it's a good feeling. It's joy and pride in what they're doing because it is clicking with them."

Wilbanks thanked Caledonia Middle School's Heather Buse for running the color guard in the absence of assistant band director Angelina Neal, who was out on maternity leave. He said Zaylie Jenkins, a former CHS student, and Ormani Smith, a student at East Mississippi Community College, provided additional help in the band's efforts.

The band's success has played a part in its growth. Wilbanks, who is in his seventh year as band director, started with 81 total students in grades 6-12 in his first year and now has a group that is 225 strong. He hopes the burgeoning band will be able to expand into a garage that is adjacent to the band hall. He isn't sure if that added space will be used

for storage or for more practice space, but he is excited to see the progress continue this weekend.

If the band's improvement from its afternoon performance to its evening showing at Tupelo is any indication, Wilbanks should have a smile as big as the largest Cheshire cat's grin Saturday afternoon.

"We hope to do well," Wilbanks said. "Last year, we were in 15th place, but that was the first time for us to go. We pulled up the scores from last year's championship and compared them to our evening evaluation at Tupelo and the scores were 10-13 points higher, so the band has improved tremendously overall. We hope to continue that improvement and fix the little things the judges have pointed out."