

Breaking the Color Guard Barrier

Julio Ortiz and Camille Zuniga out to prove that flag squad is for everyone

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Julio Ortiz probably doesn't realize it now, but he is helping usher in a new era of acceptance at San Benito High School.

In time he may look back and see that he helped forge a change in which stereotypes are reversed and teens are allowed to find their path wherever it might lead them – without threat of ridicule.

Until then, Ortiz, a 16-year-old junior, is the only guy on what historically has been an all-girl team. He's the first male member of the school's marching band flag squad whose entrée onto the squad was actually supported and encouraged by the directors of the band and color guard.

Ortiz' presence has lent a feeling of equality to the squad, which the color guard director believes is a good lesson for students.

"I don't care what gender they are," said Camille Zuniga, squad director. "I grew up in the 1970's when it was equal rights for women. Now it's equal rights for guys. If they want to pick up a flag, let them pick up a flag."

Acceptance by the general public is another matter. Each time he takes the field at a game or marches in a parade down a public street with his female teammates, he's subject to verbal abuse from bystanders passing judgment.

"Gay." "Pansy." "Flag girl."

Those were just a few of the insults yelled Ortiz' way during a Memorial Day parade this year.

"I just tune them out," said the soft-spoken Ortiz.

Zuniga, in her second year as color guard director, had males on teams she coached previously in Santa Clara but knows this is new territory for Hollister. Westley Adams, who helps coach the team, was on the squad, but he got there by tricking the former band director.

Zuniga not only welcomes Ortiz, but she'd like to attract other male members to the squad.

"A lot of times a person will question the masculinity of a boy that will pick up a flag or rifle," said Zuniga, who maintains that the discipline required to march in formation and perform routines ahead of the band makes it a legitimate sport.

Teammates know the work that goes in, and in the true spirit of "team" suffer when insults are hurled at Ortiz.

"I've heard so many people make fun of him. It makes me so mad," said Yajayra Almanza a 14-year-old freshman on the color guard team.

But the name-calling doesn't faze Ortiz, who never second-guessed his decision to join the team his sophomore year when his friends recruited him.

He embraced the color guard and excelled at it. Never having participated in an organized sport, Ortiz took a liking to the guard, especially the friendships he has made and the chance he has to travel to competitions.

"It's fun to go do something on the weekend, not sit at home and watch television," Ortiz said.

During a recent practice in the parking lot behind the band room, Ortiz stood at attention, holding a bright red flag, practicing twirls in rapid succession. As other members occasionally dropped their flags, Ortiz, dressed in baggy blue jeans and skateboarding shoes instead of his white jacket, red sash and black pants, performed flawlessly.

He's not satisfied simply learning routines and maintaining the status quo. He wants to bring a new element to the team, so he is learning to twirl a mock saber and rifle so he can use during routines.

Flag teams weren't always the female domain. Today's high school color guards are offshoots of military color guards and were comprised of soldiers marching with rifles or sabers in hand as they guarded the American flag.

Eventually color guard teams dropped the erect, symmetrical style of the military and started performing maneuvers with flags and weapons. Eventually, military uniforms were replaced with costumes, and music was incorporated into the routine, making for a blend of theatre and dance.

With the pageantry, the color guards became increasingly popular among females. While having a boy on the team is new for San Benito High School, Zuniga has worked with many before.

At Wilcox High School in Santa Clara, where Zuniga instructed the color guard team before transferring to San Benito last year, almost half of the team was male. Zuniga says in metropolitan areas there are marching groups, which led to male members on the Wilcox team.

"Hollister is a little more off the beaten track. They tend to want to be more traditional in the make of the group here," Zuniga said.

The Zunigas – husband James is the band director – are attempting to make the color guard an equal opportunity experience.

It wasn't always so. Take the case of Westley Adams, now 19 and a student of culinary arts at Cabrillo College. When he wanted to join his girlfriend on the student-run color guard in 1998, his freshman year, the band director told him "no."

"It was a radical change from what he was used to," Adams said.

The band director offered up a compromise, Adams said. He would let the young student join the marching band so Adams could travel with the band on the annual spring tour. It didn't matter that Adams wasn't musically inclined. He could fake it.

"He wanted me to pretend to play an instrument just so I could go," Adams said, "I can't read music to this day."

Not content with pretending to play the French horn, Adams learned the color guard routine behind the band director's back. At the last practice before the team left on the tour, he performed with them. They made him an integral part of the routine.

It was too late for the director to remove him.

Adams performed with the team all four years of high school, graduating last year as the captain.

Now serving as the assistant instructor of the color guard, Adams credits Camille Zuniga with, "helping to open up the door of opportunity."

It's not a door held wide open. And having a guy on the team isn't without its difficulties, beyond the name-calling. The presence of a male member on the squad means choreography must be designed to be less feminine. It means going against the traditional light-footed, spangled-flag routines often preferred by contest judges and band directors.

"When you're out for parade they expect to see cute little girls in short skirts with nice smiles," Zuniga says. "When you put a boy out there you just don't get the same effect."

That said, Zuniga says inclusion of all students in band activities is more important than pleasing far-away judges.

"Stylistically we're at a disadvantage," Zuniga says. "I don't care about that. If someone wants to perform, they should be allowed to perform."

Last year Camille was able to attract a few boys from the marching band to join the color guard during the winter season, which lasts from January to March. But she says she was only able to because the color guard performs indoors during the winter and is less visible to the public – and because the marching band takes a break for the season. With a week of recruitment left Camille hopes to sway a few more boys over from the marching band.

But whether Ortiz will inspire other guys to join the marching squad year-round in the future remains to be seen. What school officials do know is that from the looks of participants at the junior-high level, the prospects don't seem likely.

The Rancho/Maze color guard, a feeder program to the high school, has never had a male member since its inception in the late 1980's.

"No one has ever expressed interest in the team. They wouldn't be prevented, it's just that no one has ever asked," said Joe Ostenson, the director of the Rancho/Maze band.

Zuniga said the problem is simply a lack of role models. If young boys don't see other boys participating in non-traditional events, they don't realize it's an activity that is available to them.

"They don't know they can do it," said Zuniga of the young students. "They don't know it's acceptable, they think it's a girl's activity."

Zuniga wants boys to understand that color guard is a sport that it takes eye-hand coordination and stamina – traits that can be used in other areas of life. Zuniga is about to launch an effort to introduce the squad to youngsters in an effort to plant the seed. In December she's taking Ortiz and Adams to visit with the Rancho/Maze Band in the hopes of sparking interest in male students.

But erasing the stigma of color guard being feminine is not easy.

"People say things without giving things a chance. This is a very sport oriented school and they don't consider it a sport," said Zuniga, adding that color guard is referred to as the "Sport of the Arts" by the official governing body.

There is one way of attracting boys to the team that Zuniga has learned during her years of instruction.

"A lot of times boys join to meet girls," Zuniga said. "They pick it up and discover it's fun. They get into it for the wrong reasons but stay for the fun reasons."