

Knights of Steel

McCallum High School's steel band has become one of the most respected and sought after performance groups in Austin, Texas.

What started 11 years ago as a way to include more students in McCallum High School's music program has steadily progressed into an energetic and in-demand performance group. **Today, Knights of Steel is one of the most well known steel band programs in Texas—and one of the largest public school steel bands in the United States.**

From Four Pans

Carol Nelson, head band director at McCallum High School, founded Knights of Steel during the spring semester of 1998. The original band consisted of four pans (tenor pan, double seconds, triple guitar, and bass) and has grown considerably since that time. McCallum was the first school to offer steel drums as a daily class in the Austin area. Carol hired CJ Menge as an Artist-In-Residence that same semester, which marked the beginning of a close working relationship between Carol and CJ that continues today. **CJ has worked closely with many other high school and middle school steel drum programs in the Austin area, and founded the Inside Out Steel Pan Project, an Arts-in-Education program and community steel band.**

Steel band enrollment for the first year, was 20 students, with a mix of first-time musicians and members of the school concert band. Carol, a trumpet player and pianist, would often accompany the band on electronic keyboard. With only four pans and 20 students, Carol made large laminates of the different pan layouts so every student could practice along with the class. In 2000, newly hired assistant band director Brian Theodorsen began instructing the band. **Theodorsen, a percussionist, instantly took to pan and helped to elevate the group to new levels.**

To 30 Students

Support for the band grew and more pans were added, along with a second class period, allowing the students to be split into beginning and advanced ensembles. The Knights of Steel were building a reputation around Austin for their energetic live performances and talented young musicians. Brian Klenzendorf began leading the band in 2003 and remained at McCallum through the 2005-2006 school year. Brian, a University of Texas graduate and alumni of their steel band, brought valuable pan experience to help refine the band's sound. Under Brian's direction the program grew to nearly 30 students. Between the two bands, instrumentation had grown to four tenors, four double seconds, two guitars, and two sets of bass pans. The advanced band grew in technical ability, which allowed them to perform much more difficult literature including Andy Narell's "Sea of Stories" and Len "Boogsie" Sharpe's panorama chart "Fire Down Below."