

Young men with their horns

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SOUTHINGTON - Holiday festivities tonight and Friday will have an added feature.

Along with the typical carol singing, cookie eating and tree lighting, Christmas in Plantsville and Hospitality Night will feature Southington Brass, a trumpet ensemble that includes Southington High School Principal Martin Semmel, his brother, Erik, and Timothy Johnson, band director at Kennedy Middle School. Eight young musicians, from grades six and eight at Kennedy and DePaolo middle schools, will also be playing with the group.

The ensemble is raising money to donate to The Mill Foundation for Kids, which helps improve the lives of sick children.

Erik Semmel said he organized the band in an effort to avoid being a "plastic person," something his middle school band teacher, Frank Hooper, called him after hearing that he'd received a business degree from the University of Connecticut.

The comment stung Erik Semmel and, along with his desire to do something charitable in the community, spurred him to get together in September with his brother, Johnson and some middle school trumpeters. Eight times since, the Semmel brothers and Johnson - all of whom have played the trumpet since fourth grade - and the middle schoolers have practiced for 90 minutes on Sunday nights in Erik Semmel's garage.

"We're giving back to the community and we'll be playing holiday music," said Erik Semmel, who hadn't been playing the trumpet as regularly as he'd like but had the idea of starting the group about five years ago. "I'm getting my chops back and building my (mouth) muscles back up. I enjoy doing it, and wanted to start this group."

Erik Semmel's son, Kyle, a sixth-grader at DePaolo, is one of the eight middle schoolers in the ensemble. Erik Semmel said that although he watches Kyle's soccer games from the sidelines, he can't actually play the game with him; being in the trumpet group allows father and son to play together.

Johnson echoed that sentiment.



Photo by Dave Zajac

Kennedy Middle School students left to right, Michael Mauro, 11, Ian Powell, 13, Sam Johnson, 11, and Michael Loose, 11, are part of a brass ensemble which will perform at holiday festivities Christmas in Plantsville and Hospitality Night.

"This is a nice way for me to play with my son," Johnson said. Sam Johnson is a sixth-grader at Kennedy.

Although some of the music can be difficult, Sam said he's been enjoying the practices. He also said it's fun to play with the adults. He's been dividing his own practice time between music he needs to master for the middle school band and the Southington Brass repertoire.

"I usually play half and half," said Sam, who has been playing the trumpet since the third grade. "I try to balance it out."

Martin Semmel said that, when Johnson joined the group, he brought the rehearsal mentality to the practices.

"He's trained to do rehearsals and he knows what to look for," said Martin Semmel, who played the trumpet all the way through college. He was in a jazz band at the University of Connecticut and played with the bands at the schools at which he worked before becoming principal at SHS.

"There's six trumpet parts; they're all different," Martin Semmel said. "The kids aren't used to each having their own parts or playing different things."

During rehearsals, the adults stand behind the students and play certain sections so the youths know how their part should sound.

"I don't think the kids are intimidated (by the adults); they're all strong and put up brave fronts," Johnson said. "They can handle their parts."

Johnson said finding the right music was a challenge, but they've found the perfect mix of level-appropriate music with a holiday touch.

"They just sit in a horseshoe, nod and go," Johnson said. "It's a unique musical experience for them."

The Semmels and Johnson hope the band plays beyond the Christmas season. Erik Semmel also hopes his two other children take up the trumpet and eventually play in the group. Martin Semmel hopes his children do, as well.

"Kids today are seen as gamers or always texting," Martin Semmel said. "But these kids took an hour and half on a Sunday night to sit and play music."

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