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Ron Dzwonkowski: Michigan bagpipe and drum group fulfills a solemn duty

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Gary Marchetti, a founding member of the Metro Detroit Police & Firefighters Pipes and Drums, plays a send off for a Michigan National Guard Unit deploying to Iraq in 2007. / METRO DETROIT POLICE & FIREFIGHTERS PIPES AND



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Gary Marchetti formed a band 10 years ago, hoping they'd never get a gig.

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But on 30 sad occasions since, the Metro Detroit Police & Firefighters Pipes and Drums has been called upon to perform at the funeral of a public safety officer killed in the line of duty.

"It's a long tradition. Just about every culture has some form of pipes that are played as a tribute on these kinds of occasions," Marchetti said. "I know there are some people who feel the pipes are always associated with death. ... But it's such a haunting sound. I feel it really helps with the grieving process that people need to go through."

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Marchetti, 53, of Lenox Township in Macomb County is a Detroit native who retired in 2010 after a 30-year career in police work -- starting in Houston but for a quarter-century in Dearborn, where he reached the rank of detective sergeant. Such a long career took him to a number of police funerals where the traditional pipe and drum bands were brought in from other states.

"It was just an embarrassment to me," said Marchetti, who had spent two years learning to play a Scottish Highland bagpipe. He became a founding member of the local band that had eight members -- all active or retired public safety officers -- when it played for the first time in August 2002, at the funeral of a Hazel Park police officer who was killed in a gunfight.

Since then, the group has grown to 27 members and, in recent years, expanded its schedule to include fund-raisers and other events. The band has organized as a nonprofit and accepts donations to defray the cost of its outfits and equipment.

But its members have not lost sight of the reason they joined.

"We are there to honor our brothers and sisters who have fallen in the line of duty," Marchetti said. Unique in Michigan because its members are all from the public safety ranks, Marchetti said the band will reach out to a police or fire department that has suffered a loss.

"We've never been turned down when we have offered to appear," he said.

He said tradition calls for the pipes and drums to be played every time the body is moved during a service, "to accompany the spirit of the deceased." Almost always, the concluding hymn is "Amazing Grace," played at the cemetery or other final resting place.

"It is very emotional, but it is the tradition of the piper to never show emotion, to be rock solid," Marchetti said. "And it's probably the hardest tradition to maintain. You have to really work hard to keep your focus. People are looking to you for strength."

At a firefighter's funeral in west Michigan, Marchetti recalled, he saw the fallen man's three young children at graveside and had to excuse himself from playing the solo opening of "Amazing Grace." He didn't think he'd get through it.

"I had to delegate," he said. "It happens. For anybody to say it doesn't, well, they're not being human."

Marchetti explained that bagpipes produce nine basic notes and that a group of pipes played together are supposed to be in perfect accord, sounding as one. That, too, underscores the tradition of police and firefighters feeling as one with a fallen comrade.

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The Metro Detroit Police & Firefighters Pipes and Drums will play at several events this week commemorating the 9/11 attacks and will perform Sept. 28 at the Free Press-sponsored Detroit premier of "Burn," the documentary about Detroit firefighters.

Meantime, its members will keep practicing once a week, preparing for that gig they don't want.

"We wish we never had to play them but we must be ready," Marchetti said. "We'll be there."

For more information or to make a donation, go to <http://metrodetroitpolicefirepipesdrums.org> .
