Voice of the Navy

By: Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jonathan Pankau

"My mother used to say that my middle brother had a very squeaky voice until she realized that it wasn't that his was so squeaky, it was that mine was always so inordinately low," joked Chief Musician's Mate Courtney Williams, earning a giggle from his wife Stacey.
Williams, whose voice has now been dubbed the voice of the Navy, knew growing up that he wanted to perform. His craving for music and theatre was fed early on by family members.

Growing up in a one stop light town, Courtney described Greenbrier, Tennessee, as an enjoyable experience, only a half an hour from downtown Nashville. The Tennessee Performing Arts Center was his childhood hangout and he would watch performances of Jekyll and Hyde or The Secret Garden. Grandma would buy season tickets to Opryland, the former Nashville theme park, which hosted scores of country music acts and music legends like Ray Charles and Victor Borge.

With his grandfathers both Korean War Vets, Courtney had considered military service often as a young man, but it wasn't until he was given a chance to audition for the Navy's Sea Chanters that he saw how his life's passion, could also be a service to his country.

"They have anywhere from a couple to as many as sixty people show up on audition day," said Courtney. "I was terribly nervous and the audition day is a long day, so you have a lot of time to sit and get more nervous and think about 'Did I do that right' or 'Did I say that correctly?'"

The Sea Chanters needed a true bass and Courtney's qualifications were self-evident, but a musical audition was not the only challenge to overcome. He described the interview process as the most nerve-wracking hurdle. Military protocol was a foreign concept to him as a civilian and he was never really sure who he was talking to at any given time and what rank they were. After being selected, Courtney remembered feeling immensely relieved and excited to enlist in the Navy and do what he loves for a living.

"Practice hard. Practice really hard," Courtney advises anyone interested in being an MU. "It is a competitive field to get in to."

Courtney said his time in the Sea Chanters as worth the struggle. His memories of singing at Fleet Week New York in 2000 and opening for the premiere of the movie "Pearl Harbor" aboard USS Stennis(CVN 74), interspersed with frequent visits to the White House, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff's residence and the Chief of Naval Operations' (CNO) residence, remind him that part of his career was well spent.

"My time in the Sea Chanters was a wonderful experience. I was so humbled to take part in ceremonies like the memorial service for Alan Sheppard (the first American to travel into space) and the National Day of Prayer Remembrance at the National Cathedral after 9/11."

After seven and a half years as the Sea Chanter bass, Courtney was selected as the narrator for the US Navy Concert Band, a position also known as the Voice of the Navy.

“Over the course of time, (high level officers) start hearing the same voice and then they start expecting that same voice at various other ceremonies. So, over the course of the last ten years now, I’ve started doing more and more ceremonies in the D.C. area.”
Courtney described being the Master of Ceremonies for both of President Obama’s inaugurations as the highlight of his career as the concert narrator. He describes himself as terribly nervous; even to this day, when he stands next to some of the prestigious men and women he frequently meets on his ceremony narrating tours.

“What I try to do is focus on the task at hand, focus on what my specific job is in that ceremony and that’s to lead people through whatever the event is. If I can focus on getting us to the next step in the process, then hopefully I don’t have time to focus who’s actually out in the audience and who I’m speaking to.”

Exhibiting Navy pride and professionalism is Courtney’s favorite part about being a Navy Musician. Meeting family members after the show and hearing stories of their service or their family member’s time in the military reminds him again and again the importance of the Navy and what the US Navy Band does for his country.

“You get to talk to the grandmother whose grandson is in the Navy and she’s so proud and just wants to tell you about what he’s doing in the Navy. In all fairness, most grandmothers think that all of their grandkids are SEALs and they’re doing the most important job in the Navy, but it’s wonderful to be able to spend a few minutes with them and let them, sort of, see a face of their family and the Navy through you.”
With so much achievement marking his career so far, Courtney is excited to see what he future holds.

“I can’t really envision what my Navy career will be going forward but I know it’s going to be a great thing for me and my family,” said Courtney. “The Navy’s been wonderful to us and we looking forward to the next few years and where it can take us next.”

There are more than 600 musicians in the Navy but the Navy only hires about 25 musicians each year, most with bachelor’s or master’s degrees in music. The 11 active duty Navy bands perform military ceremonies and public concerts, support the Navy’s public outreach and recruiting efforts. Navy Musicians participate in about 6,000 performances for live audiences totaling more than 15 million people, not including the 300 million people reached via broadcast. Auditions to become a Navy musician are by appointment only. Contact the Navy’s audition coordinator at 901-874-4316 or toll free at 1-866-827-5672 or email the audition coordinator at MILL_NavyMusic@navy.mil.