Freshman Becomes Only WSU Twirler
by Edmund "Frazer" Myer

If you've watched any of the Cougar football games this fall, chances are you've seen WSU freshman Valea Higheagle, the only "feature twirler" in the WSU marching band.

Higheagle, 18, of Olympia, Washington, is a member of the Chehalis Tribe, and a descendant of the Nez Perce Tribe as well. Her parents Billie and Tony Higheagle, Jr. are both WSU alumni.

She graduated from Olympia High School in 2015, and is in her first semester at WSU. Higheagle is undecided about what major she wants to pursue; she is considering either pharmacy or athletic training.

Higheagle began twirling at five years old. "I can remember back when I would always watch my mom and sister twirl, and how I wanted to join and do what they were doing," said Higheagle. She grew-up performing and taking twirling lessons for 13 years with a private group called Fantasia Twirling Corps, since her school didn't have an official "twirling" program.

There are many different events twirlers compete in: Solo, Dance-Twirl, Strut, Two-Baton, Three-Baton, and Freestyle. Each dance has their own kind of music. In Freestyle one can choose any song they like. There are also partner routines referred to as "Pairs."

In addition to local competitions, her group competed in Regionals and Nationals. They also performed for fun-fairs/other events.

Each region has their own competition, and whoever qualifies may move on to the national competition. Western Regionals is always held in California, while Nationals is hosted by a different state every time. Higheagle said her favorite is when Nationals is in Florida.

The judges base their overall score on artistic measure and technical merit. Competitors can receive a score ranging from 1–10 (10 being a flawless performance). After the judges configure a score, they then subtract .75 for each drop–penalty.

When Higheagle is competing as part of a team, they choose a song and a routine, a routine that she said, "includes a lot of choreography and exchanges."

This year at Nationals, her team placed third. She said that was a major accomplishment, since other teams had six to eight members and her team only had four.

She has won a lot of state and regional awards, she said, the most memorable was in 2014 Regionals when she placed first in "pre-trials" of the Junior AA Division, which qualified her for Nationals.

Another celebrated moment was when she won the State Title in the "Strut" in 2012. She said the trophy was almost as tall as her and she received a certificate Starline gives you for a free baton.

Higheagle explained that Starline is the main brand used by twirlers and that Starline carries various twirling necessities,
such as tape and all types of merchandise. However, she prefers the tennis tape by the Wilson brand. She likes it because it gives her a better grip and it lasts longer.

When asked about when she gets most nervous, Higheagle responded, "I would say that right before I start my routine is the most nervous part for me. Right when the music starts I start twirling as fast as I can. When I start to go into autopilot is when I'm no longer nervous."

She followed that by stating, "I do not twirl for the sole purpose of winning; I twirl because I love what I do. I go out there and I twirl to the best of my abilities. I always congratulate the other athletes in my division, if they won or not. It's all about sharing the same passion and lifting each other up."

When deciding what college to attend, Higheagle had considered going to University of Hawaii, she even traveled to visit their campus. Then, her coach informed her that WSU was opening a spot for a "feature twirler" and encouraged that Higheagle apply, so she could remain in-state, stay close and work together.

To apply for the position, she sent a compilation video of highlights from her performances. WSU sent her an email, congratulating her for being chosen as the "Feature Twirler" for the WSU marching band. She received a partial scholarship and a stipend which pays for transportation fees.

The fees cover her commute from Pullman to Seattle. Since there is not an official "twirling" coach here at WSU, during the fall, Higheagle takes a plane back to the west-side of the state to meet and practice with her coach (every couple of weeks). During the week while in Pullman, she practices with the marching band for two hours a day, four days a week.

With no coach on site and being the only "twirler" at WSU, she normally practices by herself. There is nobody to tell her specific tricks/flips they want done or to inform her if she messes up. She does need to know what position to be in, as well as what steps to take, but the rest is up to her.

She said she doesn’t get embarrassed when she makes a mistake, “Twirlers know that they can’t always be perfect.”

So far, in her first semester at WSU, she has performed at home football games, and during half–time of the Apple-Cup, which was in Seattle this year. She said prior to college she usually performed inside, so performing outside was unusual at first. She compensates by performing "within herself" and not attempting technical tricks.

The first time she had to perform here at WSU, she was nervous, and it didn’t help that it was raining. What calms her nerves is her family comes over for every home game, and when she feels nervous, just knowing her parents are in the stands calms her down. Also, she recalls the experience of performing in "twirling" competitions, she says, performing in front of the WSU crowd is not as nerve-wracking as performing for the judges.

“Performing for the college is a lot more fun than competitions. I don’t do anything too tight or compact,” she explained. “In competitions you’re more about the technique, and there are tons of others twirlers who analyze your performance.”

The band director addressed her about potentially being able to perform at volleyball matches and basketball games this year, which is something she is really interested in doing. “I really enjoy performing; it’s what I like to do.”

She has been twirling her whole life, so she imagines that in the future, she will be involved in twirling regardless of the academic field she decides to pursue.

Twirling has allowed her to travel and visit many places, which is something she really enjoys doing. After she’s finished with school, she wants to travel and see different places around the world, and she hopes to visit as much of the world as possible.