
Posted on Mon, Dec. 05, 2005

Can't get to a concert? They send one to you

By Terry Bitman
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A cheery smile spread across Tom Rhoe's face as he opened the door to the familiar voice he had heard in the hallway.

"Glad to see you," said Rhoe. "How have you been?"

"Doing well," Peter Homan said as he lugged his electric keyboard into Rhoe's apartment.

Within minutes Homan and his partner, cellist Marilyn MacRae, were seated at the dining table in the Northgate II high-rise in Camden. Rhoe also sat at the table while his wife, Faye, sat on a hassock. Both are blind.

"Want some Christmas music today?" Homan asked.

And so began a private 30-minute concert of holiday standards for the Rhoes, in the first of three visits the musicians would pay this day to residents of Northgate II.

While many musicians travel to nursing homes and other facilities for the aging and ailing, the Camden County Cultural and Heritage Commission has gone a step further by dispatching musicians to private residences.

The program is called Musical Interludes, and for nearly 20 years it has sent teams of musicians to 100 to 140 private residences a year and to about 500 nursing homes and other care facilities, said Ruth Bogutz, the commission's director.

Homan, a church choral director and organist, and MacRae, a retired engineer, have worked together for eight years and choose to entertain primarily in Camden housing projects. But Musical Interludes performers also go into more affluent communities, such as Cherry Hill, Haddon Township and Merchantville.

"Our goal is to bring the arts to anyone who wants us, regardless of health, living situation or anything else," Bogutz said. "This is not just a music program. It also is a healing program."

Bogutz figures about 5,000 people hear a performance each year - nearly 100,000 since Musical Interludes began.

The commission charges \$50 for a performance in a public setting, but a concert in a private residence is free. Each musician - there are 38 in the program - is paid \$50.

Bogutz said that the budget for Musical Interludes this year was \$43,000, and that funding came from corporate donors, county government, and the New Jersey State Council on the Arts.

"Nobody makes any money from this," MacRae said. "It truly is a labor of love."

The program grew from a hospice's request in 1986 to bring music to patients. Because of state funding - this year about \$7,000 - the program has expanded to neighboring counties.

Homan and MacRae are musicians, not singers, and their selections are sometimes lively, but more often mellow. The music ranges from Beethoven to the Beatles to Sinatra. Often, it is religious.

"We try to play what we learn the resident wants," Homan said.

Their most requested song? "Amazing Grace."

After leaving the Rhoes, the musicians went down one floor to the home of Eula Dixon, who recently turned 90 and uses a wheelchair. She is a religious woman, and they used her hymnal for selections.

"It was wonderful," Dixon said softly as the musicians finished. "I'm glad when they come."

In between their numbers, the musicians and the residents caught up on the latest news.

With the Rhoes, Homan and MacRae learned that Tom and Faye had celebrated birthdays since the last visit. They also went on a trip. And Faye Rhoe cooked Thanksgiving dinner.

"It's the personal touch that is important, too," MacRae said of the visits. "Many of these people need someone to talk to."

The musicians ask the Rhoes for requests, and Tom Rhoe suggested "that one that goes, 'Chestnuts roasting...'"

"That's easy," Homan said.

More than once, he said, Tom Rhoe has asked for the "Flight of the Bumblebee," which isn't cut out for keyboard and cello.

"I like to give them a challenge," Tom Rhoe said with a grin.

For Information

For more information on the Musical Interludes program, contact Ruth Bogutz, director of the Camden County Cultural and Heritage Commission, at 856-858-0040.

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