

A MILLION DREAMS AGO

Sing A-Long brings back memories through music

By SHEILA McGRATH

Katherine Van Haaften wasn't the type of grandmother who sat in a rocking chair and watched the world go by. She was the type who rarely sat still at all.

So when she broke both hips and had to be placed in a nursing care facility, it was especially tough on her, said her granddaughter, Jill Dover. The grandmother who could once beat her teenage grandchildren in jumprope contests grew depressed and talked about dying. When her family visited her, they found it hard to see her so changed.

But one day several years ago, Dover's mother returned from a visit to the nursing home with exciting news. A pianist had visited, playing all the old songs Van Haaften remembered from her youth. Van Haaften clapped and sang along, as did all the other residents, and when the concert was over, her brightened spirits didn't dim. She was her old self again.

"She talked about the great life she'd had, about growing up and the experiences she had," Dover said. "It brought something back in her."

Van Haaften died in 1994, but the idea sparked by the pianist's visit to the nursing home that day has grown into a nonprofit organization called Senior Sing A-Long. Dover's father and mother, Ken and Hattie Van Haaften, of Cascade, founded the organization in 2004. Dover now runs the program, which is based in Wyoming.

More than 100 local musicians participate, playing shows at nursing homes and veterans facilities across the Grand Rapids area.

Dover said music helps rejuvenate seniors' memories, and as their memories return to them, their joy in life comes back as well.

Denise Hessler, activity therapist at the Grand Rapids Home for Veterans, said none of the programs they put on for residents are more popular than the music programs. She works on an Alzheimer's unit, where some of the residents can no longer put whole sentences together. But once the music starts, they can sing entire songs along with the performer.

There was one resident, she recalled, whose voice she had never heard. But when a musician came in and played "You Are My Sunshine," he sang the whole song. Hessler called the man's wife to tell her about it, and at the next Senior Sing A-Long event, she was there to watch.

"His wife cried the whole rime," Hessler said. "She hadn't heard him talk in two years."

The first musician on board was Irv Lueder, who plays the accordion. Now, in addition to six more accordionists, there are singers, dancers, bagpipers, and "just about everything," Dover said.

Initially, the program ran at the Grand Rapids Home for Veterans and about six other facilities, Dover said. Now it operates in 80 facilities around the Grand Rapids area.

The programs are free to the facilities that host them, but the musicians are paid for their appearances. Until recently, Senior Sing A-Long has been funded by donations from the Van Haaftens' friends and family.

"We've been tapping out everyone we know," Dover said. Now,



ADVANCE photos by BRIAN FORCE

Guitarist and singer Jim Galligan plays a concert for Brookcrest residents in Grandville. He joined the Senior Sing A-Long program nearly five years ago.

they're hoping to find additional funding sources so they can bring the program to more facilities that have limited entertainment budgets. In November, the Sparta Community Foundation came through with the first grant, for \$3,120.

Becky Cumings, chair of the Sparta Community Foundation's grant-making committee, said they saw the grant as an opportunity to help senior citizens, a population they don't normally serve.

"Most of our grants don't reach them, and we felt it was a good program to enrich their lives," she said.

Chris Matzke, director of recreational therapy at Brookcrest, in Grandville, said after a Senior Sing A-Long performance, residents are always smiling a bit more. The shows get them talking amongst themselves, she said.

"Singing along, listening to the old music, it's more special than an everyday activity," she said. "It's nice because of how it's free of charge for us so we're able to get more people coming in."

Jim Galligan, a vocalist and guitarist, joined Senior Sing A-Long about a year after it started and has been playing for them ever since.

Galligan normally plays jazz and blues, but will accommodate whatever requests the audience has. Sometimes that means playing "Let Me Call You Sweet-heart" and other Tin Pan Alley songs, other times he's playing rock tunes or improvising a polka on his guitar so residents and staff can get up and dance.

Many of the performers have developed big followings in the homes and are greatly loved by residents, he said. Often, as he's leaving a concert, residents who aren't even able to speak will try to reach out a hand to thank him, he said.

"It goes way beyond the money," Galligan said. "Some of my friends don't understand this. They ask me why I play in senior facilities. It's because you have those kinds of experiences, and you realize how special they are. You can talk to anybody who performs for Senior Sing A-Long and they'll tell you the same thing."

To reach Senior Sing A-Long, visit their Web site at www.seniorsing-along.org or call them at 538-8590.