

Senior Sing-A-Longs bring joy to overlooked nursing homes

By TOM RADEMACHER, Grand Rapids Press



PRESS PHOTO/REX LARSEN

Ken and Hattie VanHaften created and support the program because "God's been good to us."

For too many, nursing homes and retirement villages are the last stop before their final resting place.

But that's no reason they should be shrouded in black, reduced to quiet little corners where residents wait for time to pass against a backdrop of mumbling and hominy.

There should be music.
And singing.
And ventriloquism.

Thanks to Ken and Hattie VanHaften and the tens of thousands of dollars they've spent so far, there is.

Music lifts spirits

Both Ken and Hattie, who are in their senior years, watched their own parents deteriorate in nursing homes, cultivating negative attitudes because they no longer felt challenged.

One thing raised them up, though, and that was the effect of someone playing a piano, strumming a guitar, working their vocal chords.

For years, the VanHaftens wondered how they might bring that sort of sunshine into others' lives. In the end, they decided that they would institute something they call "Senior Sing-A-Long."

"God's been good to us, and this is just

a way for us to give back," said Hattie VanHaften. Speaking on behalf of her husband, who is semi-retired as founder of a building and real estate company, she added, "We just love to see the joy we can bring to people."

Senior Sing-A-Long, a program administered by the VanHaften's daughter, Jill Dover, isn't for hospital-type environments that boast life-enrichment programs, but for lesser-known and lesser-funded places that don't have the cash to hire performers.

Music brings tears

The Sing-A-Longs are in place at least monthly at more than 25 facilities in the greater Grand Rapids area, making use of some 40 performers who are paid by the VanHaftens to ply their talents.

Art and Joy Bartlett sang religious and patriotic songs to entertain a small group of residents of Adams Park Apartments on Friday afternoon.

On Friday, "The Bartlett Pair" entertained more than a dozen residents at Adams Park Apartments, a subsidized facility for mostly disabled adults at 1440 Fuller Avenue SE.

By the time it was over, the little serenade brought tears to the eyes of more than one.

"That last one really got to me," said Tina Belbot, 46, who welled up to a gospel song entitled

"Supper time." She said it prompted her to rekindle fond memories of her late parents and husband.

"I love Christian music," she said. "I can't play it, but I do love to listen to it."

That's exactly what the Bartlett pair — Art and Joy — dished out, standing to deliver 45 minutes' worth of guitar, vocals and even

an appearance by "Frankie."

Frankie is Art's ventriloquism dummy, and while Art will never make Carnegie Hall with the way he throws his voice, it was enough to warm this crowd.

More importantly, he had the little crowd singing along to tunes he played on his guitar — "Wore Out," "God Bless America," "Old Shep" and "I Just Feel Like Something Good Is About To Happen."

Their act didn't go unappreciated.

Nor did the generosity of the VanHaften couple, who financed this and so many other performances.

"Just think of all the other things they could be spending their money on," said Joy Bartlett. "I just have unbelievable respect for them."

Tiffany Greene concurred. As a resident services specialist with the Grand Rapids Housing Commission, she works closely with folks at Adams Park and elsewhere in the city, and described what the VanHaftens have chosen to do as "very humanitarian."

How to help

There's more to do, of course. More facilities to tap, and more people to warm.

You can help if you choose, by patronizing a fund-raiser for Senior Sing A-Long set for Oct. 15 at Quail Ridge Golf Club in Cascade Township. Call 538-8590 for information.



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Dudley Washburn, left, Annie DeBruyne and Freddy Henderson listen to Art and Joy Bartlett perform "God Bless America" at Adams Park Apartments on Friday afternoon.