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A lifeline with four strings

Uke-De-Dos find kinship, relief in 'happy, little instrument'

By ERIC A. HOWALD
Of the Keizertimes

When Keizerite Gloria Jones' younger brother started to show signs of dementia, she took it upon herself to do something about it.

"He'd always loved to sing, so I went out and bought a pair of ukuleles and hoped we could learn to play them together," Jones said.

For her brother, the exercise proved too taxing. Jones ended up returning his instrument, but she kept hers and, not long after, enrolled in a ukulele class at Salem's Center 50+. That was more than two years ago and Jones is still attending classes each week. She also performs at local events with a group from the Center 50+ and area retirement facilities with a group known as the Uke-De-Dos based in Woodburn.

"Music is so rewarding and so good for seniors' brains," said the 83-year-old. "When we go to the retirement homes and play we do a bunch of old songs and invite them to sing with us. Afterward, we'll go up to them and tell them how well they sang and their faces just light up."

Studies from numerous sources have found that music can improve the mood of people suffering from neurological diseases, boost cognitive skills and even reduce the need for anti-psychotic medicines as people age. However, Norma Wilkerson, the Uke-De-Dos co-founder and leader, is seeing things from the opposite end of the spectrum.

"The ukulele and music are fun and they take care of you when you are feeling beat up. During the hour that we practice, our members can forget the things that hurt. It's amazing and so powerful. You can do hundreds of songs with two chords, thousands with three chords," Wilkerson said.

> "The people who listen to us play bless us back."
>
> — Norma Wilkerson

The Uke-De-Dos are actually an offshoot of the classes held at the 50+ Center. Wilkerson started the group with a friend about five years ago and its ranks have exploded from five members to more than 40 including a beginners and advanced class.

Wilkerson's beginner classes are held at 11 a.m. every Thursday at Senior Estates in Woodburn. Advanced class follows at 1 p.m. Each lasts about 90 minutes. Students chip in a dollar each week to cover the cost of copying music and any donations the group receives from performances are put toward equipment to help them sound better.

On July 16, the advanced class drew 21 students, 13 women and eight men. The lesson began with a group warm-up that wasn't announced so much as spread around the room like a slow-moving wave until everyone had joined in and tuned up.

Wilkerson passed out sheet music for more than a half-dozen songs and the group was making its way through *Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue* within minutes. Wilkerson encourages the group to go faster with each verse and chorus.

Next up was *Don't Fence Me In,* an oldie and goodie, then Bruno Mars' *Count on Me*. Some breaks in the tempo were audible, but the smiles and camaraderie carried the group over the rough edges.

"It will come eventually," Wilkerson encouraged them. It was the first time the group tackled the song, but the casual listener would likely never have known.

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Top: Norma Wilkerson leads the Uke-De-Dos in rehearsals. Above: Keizerite Gloria Jones strums along and sings a favorite tune.

Other selections include *Edelweiss, When I'm 84* by The Beatles, and John Denver's *Country Road*. Within 50 minutes, the group had run through the entire set of sheet music passed out at the beginning of class and Wilkerson began taking requests from around the room.

"It goes by so quick because we have so much fun. Our only rules are be kind and have fun," Wilkerson said, after the class.

Since starting the group, Wilkerson has become something of a story collector. Nearly every member of the group has a story about how a "happy, little instrument" has changed their life.

"One woman had been put down by her family for much of her life and she went to one of the family birthday parties without a gift, but brought her ukulele. She decided to play music for the baby in its crib. One-by-one the family members came in and started listening and singing," Wilkerson said. "The people who listen to us play bless us back."

Jones, of course, has a heart-tugger of her own.

"I have great-grand kids and I'm teaching them," Jones said. "They like to strum and we go marching around the house when we're all together. We're the Caterpillars and Butterflies, apparently," Jones said. "After my husband died, I had to find a way to go on and I have. This is a special time for me as much as I miss Jerry."

For more information on the Uke-De-Dos, contact Wilkerson at normawilkerson@msn.com or 503-981-9234. Ukulele classes at Center 50+ are expected to resume in the fall, call 503-588-6303 for more information.

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