

Suburban Life

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Rhythm band

Rehearsal is highlight of the week for music makers at Oak Hill

By Loraine McClish
staff writer

THEIR COSTUMES are hats representing many nations. They sing "Silent Night"

in German, "Noel, Noel" in French, "Feliz Navidad" in Spanish.

In the play bill, Russia is represented with "Nutcracker," when they accompany themselves with bells, tambourines, castinets and drums.

When their performance is over they are filled with elation, while their director is spent and perspiring.

"We've done 12 concerts since October and have that many coming up," said Kelli Dowd-Schlavi, music therapist and director of Oak Hill Care Center's Resident Band and Choir.

"I can hardly believe what I'm hearing every time we have a rehearsal. They keep getting better, which is just not the rule in nursing homes when you compute in the aging and debilitating factors of Alzheimer's or arthritis.

"They know half a dozen songs now in a foreign language, and they learned them phonetically from sheets I had made up — with a lot of the studying done outside of rehearsal hours. They even called their own practice time once in the TV room, without me, to surprise me. For many of them Tuesday morning rehearsal is the highlight of the week."

When Dowd-Schlavi realized she was talking in a rush, she slowed down and said, "I'll do anything to motivate them. I'll stand on my head or do a tap dance if that's what it takes. Whatever it takes to get them to move is what I'll do."

WHAT SHE DOES in Oak Hill Care Center in downtown Farmington is the same thing the Wixom resident does in all of the four facilities operated by Care Centers of Michigan.

"I give them a goal, which is the concert date, and I give them something to remember, a reason to remember," Dowd-Schlavi said.

"It took months — I had to fight to get them to move what, in some cases, were very rigid arms that are now limbered up with the exercise

they get sticking to the beat of the rhythm instruments.

"And I keep changing the beat on them to keep them alert. I purposely put (LeRoy Anderson's) 'Sleigh Ride' on the concert program because its rhythm is a little tricky, and because I have a personal relationship with each one of them, they are alert. They do watch me closely and are alert to directions."

And as in all of the four facilities where she leads a rhythm band, nurses stop on their rounds to listen to the rehearsals in session, or aides will stop with a resident in their care lured by the music to watch the performance.

"They are still doing that," Dowd-Schlavi said. "They've been listening to Christmas carols since last June and haven't tired of it yet. Sometimes one of the watchers will start clapping to something like 'The Christmas Polka' and pretty soon I'll have a newcomer in the rhythm band."

"I don't have to fight with the newcomers to get them to move — they follow the rest of the band and catch on quick."

"They're about ready to start a handbell choir. That's my next goal," she said.

DOWD-SCHLAVI knew early on that she wanted to make a career in music therapy for the elderly.

She began caring for an invalid grandmother when she was 10, and at 16 was a volunteer for Four Chaplains Convalescent Center in Westland. She remained there as an aide, then as an assistant, through her high school years in Redford's Bishop Borgess, and her college years at

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Kelli Dowd-Schlavi is quick in aptitude as well as in praise for Oak Hill residents who are making music with song and their rhythm instruments.



Freida Meyer (at left) wears a Swiss yodeler's hat and Bill O'Koney (above) wears a sombrero, significant of the songs they sing in many languages, for a number that called for a combination of bells and castinets in the rhythm band.

Staff photos by Randy Borst



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

After setting up all of the holiday displays in the area's two post offices, every once in a while Harold Greene will make the rounds to do some regrouping for any that have been disturbed. This group was displayed in the Farmington Post Office.

Post offices dress up for the holidays

POST OFFICES look too much like institutions at any time of the year, according to one Farmington letter carrier, who took it upon himself to change that look for the holidays.

"This is my Christmas present to all of the people standing in line waiting to mail their packages," said Harold Greene, who decorated the interiors of both the Farmington and Farmington Hills Post Office, decorated one outside tree and then another tree in a back room solely for the employees.

"Christmas is my hobby," said Greene, who has always extended his holiday decorating hobby from Thanksgiving through Twelfth Night — except for 1988, when it extended throughout the year.

Greene started collecting anything he thought he could use to dress up the two post offices with the first after-Christmas half-price sales in 1987, and then shopped the garage sales from the time the first sign

was posted until the last sign came down.

"I never passed up one because I was always sure that would be the one that would have something I could use," he said.

What he found he could use were about a dozen artificial trees in varying sizes, inexpensive but durable ornaments that would stand up if they were handled and wouldn't matter if they disappeared, and he has no idea how many stuffed animals.

THE STUFFED animals sit in groups or alone, in or around poinsettia plants, or in or around trees. The chairs or cradles or beds or baskets they sit in — one sits alone on a throne — all came from the garage sale stops.

In one instance they call attention to a display of Post Office boxes for purchase. A couple of huge stuffed figures wear official letter carrier hats, and one tree is decorated with

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RANDY BORST/staff photographer

A stuffed hippopotamus wears a letter carrier's hat while he guards the Official North Pole Mailbox. The mailbox, made by Harold Greene, stands inside the entrance of Farmington Hills Post Office.