

Harmonikids 2011 Hohner-sponsored session #5 New York City Ronald McDonald House (12/09/11)

By Gary Allegretto

25th ANNIVERSARY – HARMONIKIDS BIRTHPLACE

The concept of Harmonikids got its start roughly 25 years ago in New York City. At the time I was working in Manhattan as a musician in a local Blues band when I met fellow Blues harmonica enthusiast, Chris Neuhoff. Chris was the director of the playroom at the Sloan Kettering children's hospital – a facility for pediatric cancer. He invited me to partake in a "Blues Jam" that he held for the kids. He had acquired donations of keyboards, drums, guitars, and percussion instruments for the kids to "play" while he performed Blues rhythms on the piano. These were raucous sessions - the kids generally had no formal training but enjoyed making sounds on the instruments and seemed to get tremendous emotional release from the activity. Notably, this was before the concept of music therapy had received the widespread recognition it enjoys today as an effective treatment for specially challenged kids. .

The uplifting therapeutic effect the music had on these extremely ill kids (some terminally) deeply touched me. I especially noted how they were drawn to the harmonica. It was a perfect fit - a small, child-friendly, simple, entirely portable instrument that can be played by patients on IV's or in hospital beds. Its fascinating voice-like tone never fails to make kids smile and giggle. It can become a vital means of expressing feelings while renewing self-esteem and confidence. It even provides pain management benefits. Though the kids eagerly wanted harmonicas, for obvious health reasons I couldn't let them play mine, or share them among themselves. For this reason, I approached Hohner, my professional endorser, to acquire the instruments. Through trial and error I developed the basic fast-track technique for teaching that I still use today. The simple goal then was as it is now: provide the therapeutic joy and benefits of making music on harmonicas to children with challenges.

HOLIDAY PARTY: HARMONIKIDS ROCKS "THE HOUSE"

On December 8, 2011 Hohner sponsored Harmonikids annual return to aid kids in the same area it was conceived – The Ronald McDonald House NY. There was a festive Holiday party theme to the event. Chris had organized a local band of musicians to provide a Rhythm and Blues concert after my session. “The House” (as it is affectionately known) was decked out with holiday decorations, donated food and gingerbread houses. Roughly twenty young cancer patients and their siblings, parents, and volunteers attended my session. There was excitement in the air.

I started as always by performing songs to engage and dazzle my audience, boosting their enthusiasm even higher. I concluded with my signature “win ‘em over” trick where I convincingly play harmonica out of my ear – which had the kids giggling with puzzled fascination. Music sheets and harmonicas donated by Hohner were distributed. In spite of their overflowing excitement of receiving shiny new instruments they learned four songs at lightning speed. They were especially thrilled with holiday favorites Silent Night and Jingle Bells. When we finished the kids (and the parents and volunteers) were so delighted and proud of their new skill and their music continued to fill The House. Several pre-teen girls gathered together at the back of the room to practice. To my ears their version of Silent Night sounded like a choir of angels. In my experience, kids who are constantly told what activities they can’t do, really embrace those activities they can do. I walked over to compliment them and their faces beamed with pride. I asked if they’d like to perform for The House with the band to a resounding “YES!” When I asked what the name of their group would be when I introduced them, they came up with “Baby Squad”. Perfect.

The volunteer band was a wonderful six-piece R&B group of professional musicians from the NY area that Chris had organized to play for the kids before. They played beloved classic Rock and Soul songs that had everyone singing along and many dancing. Chris and I took turns sitting in on harmonica. Chris had purchased a bunch of colorful blow-up guitars for the kids to “play” with rock star antics - giving literal meaning to the term “air-guitar”. After a few songs I introduced the “Baby Squad”. They took the stage with nervous

determination. Jaws dropped in astonishment as they perfectly executed the song and the band followed in accompaniment. They finished to a standing ovation followed up with Jingle Bells. Everyone was amazed how well they played – especially in light of the fact that none had ever played a song before that night. Self esteem and confidence soared and the kids left the stage with wide smiles, high fives, and fist pumps. The party continued way past the kid's bed times. The joyous sound of harmonicas filled the House into the night - suitable testimony to an idea that blossomed into the award-winning global humanitarian organization that Harmonikids is today – twenty-five years later.

HOLIDAY NOTES

The response from the participants and volunteers was unanimously uplifting. Ronald McDonald House Program director Nina Friedman provided the following insights in her letter to me about the Harmonikids event:

Gary,

I thought your lesson with the kids was fabulous. It was not only a blast for them to hear you play but so much fun for them to realize this was something they could do too. They rehearsed into the evening in order to perform their new harmonica skills for their parents and peers. For both siblings and patients alike it is incredibly important for them to be able to have control over some aspect of their lives. With a short lesson and a lot of encouragement they were able to create and control this beautiful music, which also enables them to give back to their parents and their support staff at the Ronald McDonald House. It's just past 9pm and I am sitting in my office in the playroom hearing a house full of harmonicas. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Nina Friedman, Program Associate

Beyond the immediate positive impact of a Harmonikids session are

the lasting benefits, which in this case include pain management for a little girl's cancer treatments. I received this touching note from parent Jessica Hester who gives very personal insight to the pain management and emotional benefits her daughter received in the days following the session:

Dear Gary, ☐

While it is hard for me to even begin to describe the impact you had upon my 4-year-old daughter, Brooke, here at the Ronald McDonald House of New York City, I would like to begin by saying thanks...

After the special evening of harmonica and R&B, Brooke has either carried (or had me carry) her new harmonica in her pocket every single day to the hospital. I found it amazing too that she took it with her when we had to go on Saturday and she had to get blood work done and then the thing she dreads the most - needle removal from her medi-port in her chest.

This past Saturday was the first day in a very long time that she did not cry - at all - for this process. I can only attribute it to the harmonica that she was holding, entertaining the nurses with as well as the harmonic melodies coming from the down hallway from the little girl that was next in line to see the nurse. If that does not describe the positive impact the music left on the children here, I don't know what would.

Usually alone here in the city with Brooke as she gets her treatments, the talent you shared with all of us also left me as a mother feeling energized and revitalized. We are surrounded in a massive city of adult musical entertainment, and yet all of my time and focus is on my child fighting cancer, and keeping her mind occupied as much between treatments to prevent her from missing home too much. So even if we do get the chance to go and do anything, it is usually a child function. It was wonderful to get the chance to enjoy something so rich with my child as the beauty of pure music, and we both enjoyed it all so much.

Thank you again for these unrepayable gifts of your time and passion for the harmonica. It was contagious and can still be heard here around the house! God bless you today and always and to anyone

else that made the evening so special. I am including Brooke's website with this message in hopes you will get the chance to take a look at it and click on the "updates" tab where I write about how she is doing with her treatments here. Also, Brooke has a little facebook page called "Brooke's Blossoms" and you are welcome to visit there as well... it shows her special way of giving back to others the way so much kindness has been given to us.

We hope you have a beautiful, Merry Christmas, and may God bless you always,

Brooke Hester, and Mommy Jessica

<http://www.BrookeFightsBack.org>

(NOTE: PHOTOS OF THE SESSION AVAILABLE BY CONTACTING GARY AT:
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