



Blues musician Gary Allegretto gives a harmonica lesson to children in North Sumatra.

## Shades of the Blues

Gary Allegretto brings the power of musical healing to this year's Blues Festival

By Michael Pollock

**A**s a child, Gary Allegretto brought to life every parent's worst nightmare. Enjoying the sights and sounds of a multicultural festival in Washington, D.C., the future musician wandered off after a unique instrument caught his ear. While he tracked down the source of his fascination, Allegretto's worried parents searched frantically for the missing 8-year-old. Hours later they would find him standing in front of a stage, transfixed by bluesman Big Walter Horton and his electric harmonica.

Now 45, Allegretto refers to the moment as an awakening. "To this day, I'll never forget that sound," he says, "and the image of this man playing an instrument as small as his hand, but making a sound as powerful as anything I'd ever heard."

It was Allegretto's discovery of blues music, and the harmonica in particular, that led him to start Harmonikids 10 years ago. The Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization provides harmonicas and musical instruction to children with special needs. Often the children have a physical disability or are suffering from a terminal disease.

"It gives music to kids that really need music," Allegretto

says. "A kid who's been told he can't do anything anymore; a kid who's been told he has to go through all these painful operations and treatments. Every day they get worse news, and every day they go through more pain. You can give them an instrument that allows them to escape that reality and takes them to the magic of music."

### Music a Gateway to Giving

Allegretto's passion for music has its roots in his birthplace—Wilmington, where members of his family still reside. After being blown away by Big Walter Horton's hand-held "blues harp," the budding musician acquired a harmonica of his own from his grandfather. The instrument became his life; Allegretto only interrupted his playing to dig for records by his favorite blues and bluegrass artists and to sneak into local venues to hear legends like Bill Monroe and John Jackson.

After finishing college at North Arizona University, where he studied forestry, Allegretto worked days as a forest firefighter and nights as a bluesman, playing local bars near Arizona and in New

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Mexico. Within a few years his music landed him in New York City, where his experience as a volunteer at a cancer center for children struck an unexpected chord.

Along with a piano player-friend, Allegretto entertained the kids by performing jam sessions. "I thought, 'What if we gave them the instruments to keep?'" he says. "The harmonica was small and they could take it back to their beds, and a lot of these kids couldn't play cumbersome instruments."

With the creation of Harmonikids in 1995, Allegretto began traveling across the country, visiting hospitals and giving harmonicas to children with special needs. He also provides musical instruction so that they can play songs with their newfound instruments. "I don't just give kids harmonicas and walk away," he says.

### Travels Lead Back Home

Allegretto's journey of musical healing has taken him all over the world, but a recent trip to the tsunami-ravaged country of Indonesia made the blues player realize the impact his work can have. There, in orphanages and refugee camps in the province of North Sumatra, he helped child victims cope with the aftermath of the disaster through music therapy sessions. Besides the magnitude of being in an area devastated by nature, Allegretto had to overcome language barriers and tropical temperatures that reached 105 degrees F.

"It was one of the most difficult things I've ever done in my life, but also one of the most rewarding," he says. "I think most of us would've loved to have been able to do something to get over that feeling of being so helpless. To be able to contribute in a unique way makes me feel very lucky."

Allegretto makes his return to Delaware when he performs at the Riverfront Blues Festival Aug. 13 and 14, his third straight appearance at the event. He'll also hold harmonica workshops for kids and adults between performances on both days. The shows allow him to reconnect with family while rediscovering his musical past.

"I always gravitate back here for several reasons," he says. "Many people don't know it, but Delaware had a surprisingly rich—not only blues scene—but roots music scene when I was growing up." He then reels off names like Mark Kenneally, George Thorogood and Tom Larsen.

It's Allegretto's hope that through music he can touch the lives of children the same way blues artists like Big Walter Horton touched his. "It's my way to give back the joy I've gotten from playing a musical instrument," he says. ■

— Gary Allegretto performs Aug. 13 and 14 at the Riverfront Blues Festival at Tubman-Garrett Park. For more information, go to [www.riverfrontbluesfest.com](http://www.riverfrontbluesfest.com). He will also be performing Aug. 12 at the Hi-Ho Tavern, 2 W. Market St. in Newport. Tickets are not required for the show and there is no cover charge. Call 995-2939.

## Blues Festival Schedule

Saturday, Aug. 13

Noon – Nora Jean Bruso

1:30 p.m. – Grady Champion

3:15 p.m. – Chris Cain

5 p.m. – Carl Weathersby

7 p.m. – Wilmington Blues Revue with surprise guest

9 p.m. – Little Milton

After Party at Costa's Grill & Wine Bar with host band Studebaker John & The Hawks

Sunday, Aug. 14

12:30 p.m. – Randy Lippincott Band w/Byard Lancaster

2:15 p.m. – The Billy Price Band

4 p.m. – Chicago Rhythm & Blues Kings

6 p.m. – TBD

8 p.m. – The Fabulous Thunderbirds\*

Gary Allegretto's Harmonica Workshops for Kids will be held in between performances on both days.

\* Johnny Winter was originally scheduled to perform in this time slot but has cancelled due to carpal tunnel surgery.