

Courtesy of Gary Allegretto

Blues musician Gary Allegretto works with children in a tsunami-survivor camp in North Sumatra, as part of his Harmonikids program. Allegretto has donated harmonicas and music lessons to thousands of special-needs kids.

# Bluesman shares harmonicas, musical spark with children

## Ronald McDonald House kids treated to lessons and instruments

By EDWARD L. KENNEY  
The News Journal

Six-year-old Brandon Hess bounced in his seat and snapped his fingers as musician Gary Allegretto wailed a blues number on his harmonica Thursday in the sunroom at the Ronald McDonald House in Rockland.

"I've never seen him that excited," said Krystal Carter, 17, the Bridgeton, N.J., boy's aunt.

Allegretto, 45, of Los Angeles, an internationally known harmonica bluesman who will appear at the annual Riverfront Blues Festival in Wilmington this weekend, tours all over the world, including his old hometown digs in Delaware.

As he travels, he squeezes in visits to children's hospitals and Ronald McDonald houses, which offer accommodations for families of children who are receiving treatment for serious or chronic illnesses or injuries.

"It's nice to see people actually come and take the time out in their schedule to do something for the kids," said Dave



Brandon Hess, 6, of Bridgewater, N.J., learns to play harmonica at the Rockland Ronald McDonald House.

Jones, Brandon's soon-to-be stepfather. Jones is at the Ronald McDonald House while Brandon's brother, Mark, is being treated at nearby Alfred I. du Pont Hospital for Children for a congenital heart problem.

### HOW TO HELP

Harmonica bluesman Gary Allegretto is looking for corporate and individual contributions for Harmonikids, a tax-deductible program that provides free harmonicas and music lessons for special-needs children.

Send donations to: Harmonikids, 2144 Beech Knoll Road, Los Angeles, CA 90046.

Visit [Harmonikids.com](http://Harmonikids.com) for more information.

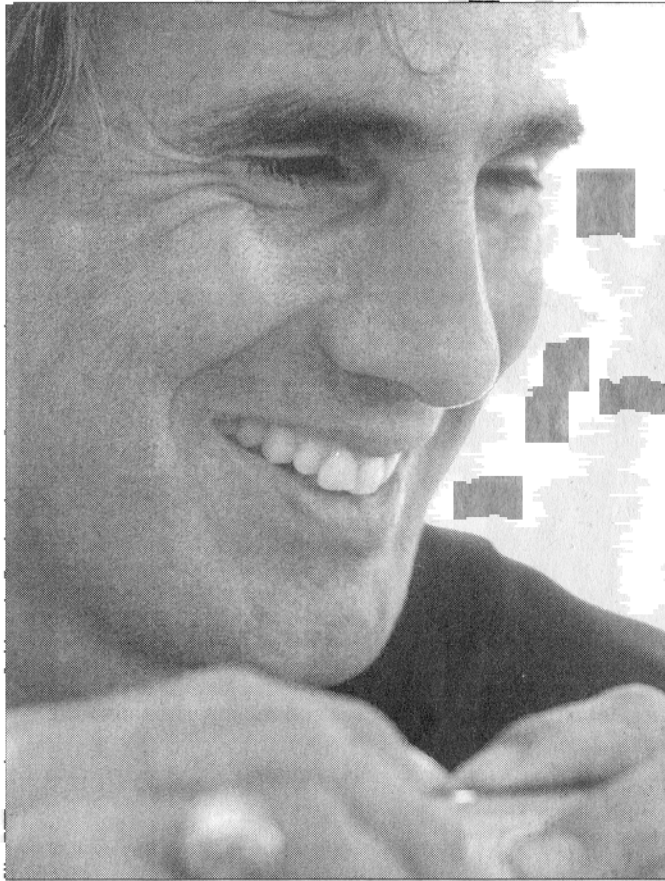
Allegretto, whose music has been featured in film soundtracks and TV shows, not only plays the harmonica for children, he gives them a free harmonica and teaches them how to play it. Music is good therapy, he said. Learning to play also gives them a sense of achievement and bolsters their self-confidence.

"I think it's great that he can dedicate his talents to helping children who really get a lot of advantage out of it," said Allegretto's mom, Alyce, who still lives in the Heritage Park development in Pike Creek where Gary Allegretto grew up.

See HARMONICA — B2



# Harmonica: Music engages special-needs kids



The News Journal/WILLIAM BRETZGER

Blues musician Gary Allegretto conducts a harmonica lesson Thursday at the Rockland Ronald McDonald House, as part of his Harmonikids program.

## FROM PAGE B1

Allegretto, who will hold a harmonica workshop between sets at the blues festival today and perform between sets on the acoustic stage with other musicians Sunday, visited the Ronald McDonald House in Vancouver, Canada, last month when he had a gig there, and he has been to the house in Rockland several times.

He learned about the benefits of music on children with special needs when he was volunteering in the late 1980s at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York. Seeing kids playing on donated instruments gave him an idea. The harmonica, because of its compactness and portability, would be something a cancer patient could play in a hospital bed or a child with multiple sclerosis could carry along in a wheelchair.

In 1990, Allegretto started a charitable program he calls Harmonikids. **The nonprofit, tax-deductible program lays the financial groundwork for him to give special-needs children free harmonicas and teach them some easy songs to get started. The upbeat, universal songs he teaches include "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," "Happy Birthday" and "Shave and a Haircut."**

He also passes out sheet music for the kids, with numbers for notes to correspond with numbers on their harmonica.

He taught songs to children in

Indonesia when he traveled to North Sumatra last spring to visit orphanages and refuge camps in areas hit hard by the tsunami that ripped through the country late last year. Allegretto gave away about **1,000 harmonicas and taught** groups of as many as 200 children how to play the instrument, he said.

"Giving a harmonica is like planting a seed," said Allegretto, whose grandfather gave him a harmonica when he was about 5 years old. "You don't always see the end result. It grows later. They might even grow up to be a piano player. It plants the seed of music.

"And it might be the last sense of joy to a dying kid. I've taught kids who didn't make it. It makes me tear up now just thinking about it. It's hard, but it's a warm feeling to know you gave something."

He keeps in contact with some of the people he meets and carries a **photo book filled with snapshots** of his visits. The mother of a 13-year-old girl in Los Angeles invited him to the girl's funeral when the child died of cancer not long after learning to play the harmonica Allegretto had given her.

"She said before she died it was the only thing she wanted to partic-

*"Giving a harmonica is like planting a seed. You don't always see the end result. It grows later"*

Gary Allegretto

## BLUES FESTIVAL

The Riverfront Blues Festival will feature Carl Weathersby, the James Cotton Blues Band with Hubert Sumlin, Nora Jean Brusco, and a surprise guest. The music will be noon-9 p.m. today and 12:30-8 p.m. Sunday at Tubman-Garrett Riverfront Park, between the Christina River and the railroad station in downtown Wilmington. \$12, 12 and younger free. 576-3095 or [www.riverfrontbluesfest.com](http://www.riverfrontbluesfest.com)

ipate in," he said the mom told him. "She did learn a bunch of songs."

Allegretto, who is endorsed by leading harmonica maker Hohner, said the music lessons give him joy and a sense of purpose, and they also teach him something.

**"When you teach special-needs kids, you learn how much you take for granted,"** he said. **"But you also learn that special-needs kids concentrate on what they can do, not what they can't do. In other words, they concentrate on their abilities, not their disabilities, and that brings lessons into your life."**

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