

# harmonica man

**His idea was simple:** help restore happiness to under-privileged children and kids with special needs. And for the past 15 years, that's exactly what Gary Allegretto has done.

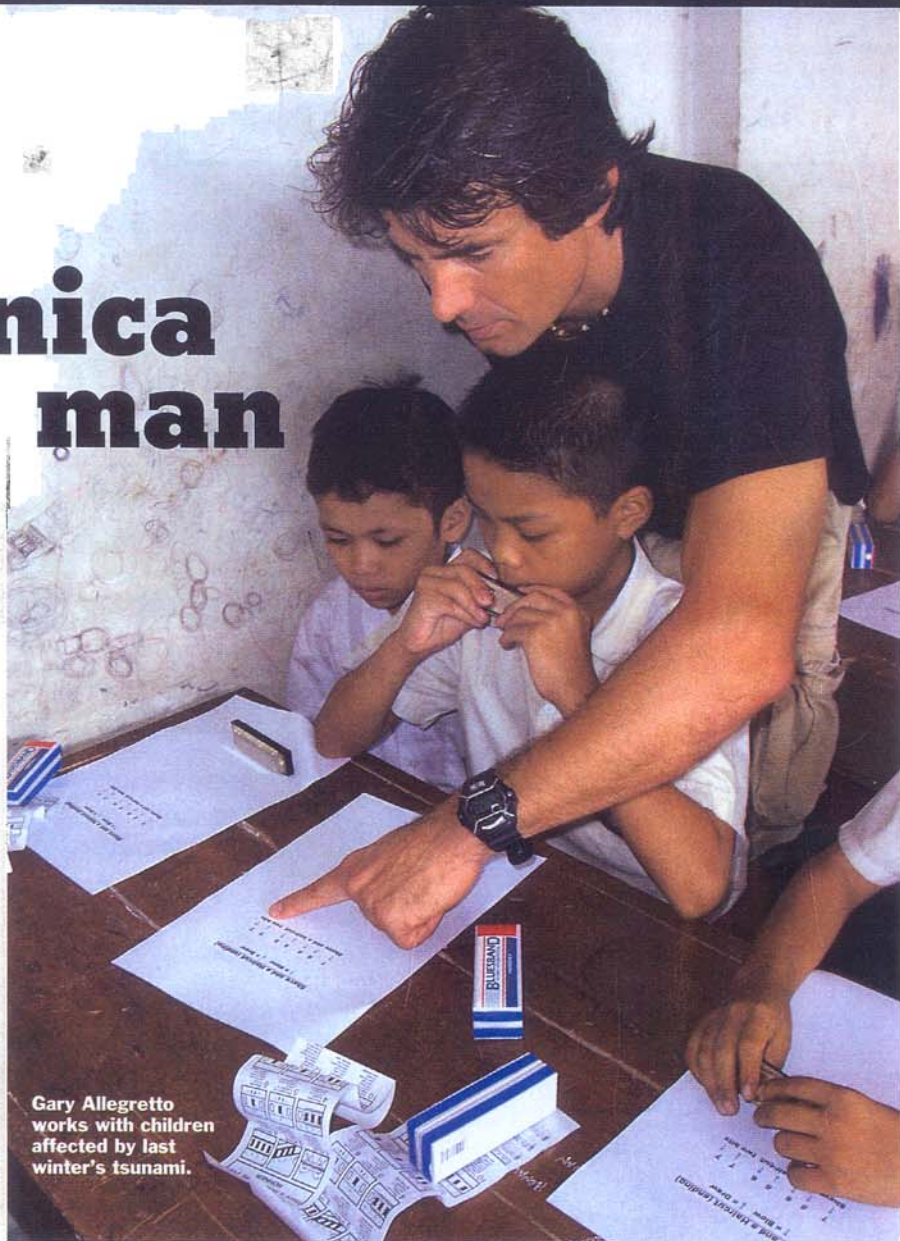
Allegretto is an acclaimed blues musician who was born in Wilmington, now lives in Los Angeles and brings the joy of music to children of all backgrounds through his Harmonikids, which provides children with a harmonica and a few simple songs to help them express their feelings.

"Not only is the harmonica easy to hold and carry, but it has a warm, almost human sound, which kids really relate to," Allegretto says.

Allegretto's project originated in New York, where he volunteered at the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, performing for young patients and teaching them to play. "Children would use the instrument to relieve their stress," he says. "You could see how, at the end of the time together, they were much happier, especially when they got to keep the harmonicas."

Allegretto took his idea to Hohner, Inc., one of the largest harmonica makers in the world, which now provides free instruments for the children.

During a concert tour in Australia last year, Allegretto landed on its version of "The Today Show." Soon after he returned to the United States, the Indian Ocean tsunami hit. Natasha Phillips of the Manly Beach Chamber of Commerce in Australia, called Allegretto. Manly's sister



Gary Allegretto works with children affected by last winter's tsunami.

city, Medan, is the capital of North Sumatra. She asked if he could help there. With 1,000 harmonicas, 300 provided by Hohner, Allegretto took off.

"There was a certain level of uneasiness that came with going there," he says. "I wasn't entirely sure how they would relate to me being there. But just the same, I knew deep down in my heart things were fine. I didn't experience any problems with the people. They are, in fact, some of the happiest people I have come across."

Allegretto hopes to return to North Sumatra soon to check on his children and to find more who need the joy of music.

"These communities suffer from extreme poverty and have no fresh drinking water," he says, "and they all walk with smiles on their faces."

—Jenni Wright