

Harmonikids

Providing the gift of harmonicas and the joy of music to special needs children.

A Quarterly Newsletter

Issue No 1 - Summer 2005

Harmonikids in Oz

After Founding Director's, Gary Allegretto, whirlwind tour of Australia late last year with his blues band, Harmonikids' vision becomes even more international. Page 2

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Rebuilding the spirits of Tsunami orphans

The December 26th, 2004 tsunami disaster claimed the lives of nearly three hundred thousand people and left an estimated 5 million homeless, including 1.5 million children, most of who were orphaned. Due to its proximity to the epicenter, the province of North Sumatra suffered the most physical damage and human loss. It's hard to imagine the emotional trauma and agony that lingers in the aftermath. Personally, I worried about the children. There were horrible reports of sexual abuse and child slavery. Other reports involved misdirection of relief funds and supplies as well as general suspicion of outside help. Like most people at the time I felt helplessly overwhelmed and confused about what I could do to make a difference in their shattered lives. As time passed many of the children's needs were provided for by donations to relief organizations. But I continued to think about addressing the traumatic stress and emotional pain the children must be feeling after having their entire worlds swept away. The opportunity to help presented itself

through interest in my non-profit organization Harmonikids.



Harmonikids is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, which provides special needs children harmonicas and the joy of music through therapeutic, entertaining, and stress relieving instructional

sessions. Through the portable and child friendly harmonica, kids are given the lasting gift of music, which provides self-confidence, achievement, creativity and self-expression. Harmonikids has effectively reached thousands of kids with special needs widely ranging from learning disabilities to cerebral palsy to terminal cancer.

When I received the phone call inviting Harmonikids to North Sumatra, naturally I pondered the effectiveness of my organization to provide aid to the child victims of such a tremendous catastrophe. I concluded that regardless of the many complications, obstacles, and dangers it would be the ultimate challenge and a unique opportunity to make a difference in their lives. I eagerly accepted.

The project was made possible through the fundraising, coordination efforts, and assistance of Natasha Phillips representing the Manly Beach Chamber of Commerce and Council in Australia. Manly's sister city Medan is the capital city of North Sumatra and many of the child tsunami victims had been relocated to orphanages and refugee camps in the area. Mr. Bayu Fadhlani, Chairman of the Medan Chamber of Commerce as well as the organizations Mercy Indonesia, and Warm Blankets provided critical assistance and support. Hohner, Inc.

donated a third of the 1000 harmonicas. Our sole financial support came from the generosity offered by General Security Australia (Insurance broking firm for medium to large business). Without the backing of GSA, none of this would have been possible.

Harmonikids primary mission was to help replenish through the healing power of music some of the things that had been cruelly taken away from these children: their ability to laugh, play and express themselves.

Many of the kids I taught had never seen or heard a harmonica before. Further, most had never had any interaction whatsoever with a "Westerner" and would



stare at me as if I were from another world. In fact, I was. I started each session introducing myself in Indonesian. Then I explained through a translator that I was there to give them

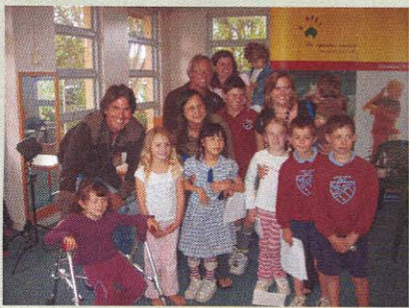
new harmonicas and

play songs with them. Often I noticed that the sessions would begin with many children looking somber, tentative, and even staring down in a depressed state. Others would fidget in excited anticipation. Upon telling them that I was there solely for them to have a good time, I would get spontaneous and unanimous applause as if relieved. Class facilities ranged from makeshift classrooms and refugee camps where the children sat politely cross legged on concrete floors on woven mats to dingy school rooms with beat up desks and benches. Rarely was there ventilation or fans and temperatures soared to a steamy 105 degrees Fahrenheit. CONTINUED PAGE 3

Harmonikids in Oz

In November of 2004, Harmonikids branched out and internationally established itself 'Down Under'. Allegretto travelled to Sydney Australia, where he performed throughout the local blues scene with his band. Taking advantage of his time there, Allegretto did Harmonikids sessions at Westmead Children's Hospital, Randwick Ronald Mc Donald House and The Allambie Heights Spastic Centre. Harmonikids was received so well that the session from Westmead was televised on The Sydney Morning Show on Channel 7. Local celebrity weather man, Tim Bailey, reported the Channel 10 news from The Spastic Centre to a rousing rendition of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star".

Tim Bailey of Channel 10 News and the Harmonikids from Allambie Heights Spastic Centre.



The interest and support generated for Harmonikids was overwhelming. It was through this publicity that notice was taken by The Manly Chamber of Commerce and General Security Australia (Insurance Broking Firm) that ultimately led to their financial sponsorship of Harmonikids Tsunami Mission. Please see "What they said....Page 4".

Music is still proving an international language of love to special needs children all over the world. Many children touched our hearts but, one stood out.

A Special Needs Kid Teaches Us

The Randwick Children's Hospital :

"When I arrived, there was a child already there in the lobby, anxiously waiting in his wheelchair with his mother. Zachary was proudly wearing his Australian "bush hat" like a cowboy, & a harmonica was already clenched in his hands. He sat playing two notes repeatedly in & out. He played with intense enthusiasm & pride. Those two notes were his complete focus & he seemed oblivious to the world as he played. I could tell that he deeply loved the sound but was not able to go where he wanted with it. As it turns out, there was good reason for this. Zach suffers from Cerebral Palsy (CP), an incurable physical condition that gives him extreme difficulty in con-

trolling simple muscular movement as well as communication skills. On top of this, Zach is blind.

Though I really hate to admit it, initially & internally I panicked. I have taught harmonica to hundreds of children with many kinds of special needs (including some with CP, who require a slower & more meticulous approach). I had never taught someone who had both CP & was blind. I teach using simple music sheets, which involves simple hand/eye co-ordination to find the notes. Zach's condition provided him with none of the faculties needed for this. To complicate things, the other kids had them. Unsure that I could pull it off, and afraid of embarrassing Zach, I privately expressed my concern to the director, Penny. She told me simply & sweetly, "what ever he learns he will love... he's just happy to be here". Of course she was right. I was selfishly thinking of myself. Zach just loves music & was indeed just happy to be there.

We had the session in the Children's hospital ward in a room that three little fellows who were in chemotherapy shared. On their door was a sign "NO GIRLS ALLOWED". This was a rule we had to break since Penny, Natasha, Zach's mom and a nurse were joining us. The boys allowed the trespass & were even gentlemen about it.



"...I was worried that he would become frustrated, but his difficulty was overcome by his overwhelming desire & love of music..."

We played through the simple jingle "Shave & a Haircut" together & then individually with little difficulty. Amazingly, Zach pulled it off. He giggled openly & proudly. He seemed very excited that he had formed his first simple song on his harmonica. I was excited for him as well. He was finding notes – not by sight – but by ear. With more instruction we played "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star". With a little coaching the group played it beautifully. Individually, Zach had a little more trouble with it. This was not surprising since this was his first experience with finding the specific notes of a song by ear. I worried that he would become frustrated, but his difficulty was overcome by his overwhelming desire & love of music. He was literally overflowing with it. Finally, as I played the last lesson for them, which was "You Are My Sunshine", Zach could not contain his enthusiasm. He began singing loudly, proudly, & sweetly along with every note.

I have never in my life heard a person sing who was more confident of his voice. Zach's voice was absolutely beautiful. It turns out "You Are My Sunshine" is his favorite song, & he sang every word like he meant them. I know that in time, his harmonica playing will be as beautiful as his singing – it already was to all of us there. There was not a dry eye in the "NO GIRLS ALLOWED" room at the children's hospital that day. That includes me"

Where Have We Been Lately?

Dec 23rd 2004~ Los Angeles Ronald McDonald House, LA, CA

2005

Jan 3rd-8th~ Harmonikids IMTA Fundraising Week Westin Bonaventure Hotel, Downtown LA

Feb 5th ~ Memphis Ronald McDonald House, Memphis, TN

April 10~ Tsunami Relief Fundraiser Gig Manly Beach Boatshed, Manly Beach, Australia

April/May INDONESIA

June 7~ UNM Children's Hospital, Childs Life Program, Albuquerque, NM

June 25~ Performance & Children's Harmonica Workshop California Traditional Music Society's Summer Solstice Folk Festival

July 9~ Vancouver Ronald McDonald House, Vancouver, B.C. (First Canadian Session)

July 18-23~ Harmonikids IMTA Fundraising Week Hilton Hotel, New York City

July 19~ Harmonikids Session, Kids Blues Jam New York Ronald McDonald House, NY, NY

Aug 13-14~ Performance, Children's Harmonica Workshops Riverfront Blues Festival, Wilmington, DE

Harmonikids Get The Blues

After winning the International Blues Competition (IBC) in Southern California, Allegretto was sent to Memphis to compete in the finals. Using the time wisely, Gary spent his days in Harmonikids Sessions at The Ronald McDonald House in Memphis and his nights performing on the legendary Beale Street. It didn't take long for the word to get out and you could hear those Memphis Blues pouring out of the house - mixed with the unmistakable laughter of children, parents and grandparents alike that accompanies all Harmonikids Sessions.

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I began by performing an American Blues song, backed by a portable recording of a band that I brought along on my I Pod and speakers. Their response was that of curious delight. Though they had certainly never heard such music, they would tap their feet, clap their hands and snap their fingers in time. I would continue with a train song that I wrote which involves a harmonica energetically whistling and chugging to imitate a train. The lively song always brought eager smiles and bobbing heads in recognition of the sounds of a train. Universally, kids still love trains. Ironically, at one session of 200 kids, a nearby passing train actually rattled the building during my song, which brought uncontrollable laughter and delight. When I had sufficiently "warmed up my audience" I began teaching the songs. As an organization that provides musical therapy through the harmonica, the songs choose to teach are very important. They must be positive, fun and simple songs that the children know by heart. As soon as I had landed in North Sumatra I started asking people what songs the children know and love. I was delighted to find out that everyone in Indonesia, child and adult, knew two songs that I teach special needs kids in the States. The first song that I taught was the simple jingle "Shave and a Haircut-Two Bits". Indeed, they have an Indonesian version. It's a song that kids can learn with lightning speed and enthusiasm. This set up their confidence to play the next song "Happy Birthday", another well-known song in Indonesia. I would dedicate the song to whichever child had a birthday that day.

By far, the most popular song I taught was an Indonesian nursery song, called "Pontong Bebek Angsa". Children and adults alike absolutely and unambiguously adore it and the mere mention of it inspires people to sing the lyrics. At each session, the children would gleefully sing the song together for me. Upon learning to play it on a harmonica, children would smile and beam with pride. Interestingly enough, this irresistibly adorable song has a literal translation as follows: "Slaughter a little duck, cook it in a pot, ladies choose dancers, turn to the left, turn to the right, la la la la la la la la."

PLAYING BY "EAR"

"On a final note about the sessions, I would like to share the following story. Before passing out the harmonicas to further engage their interest, I told the kids that I was the only person in the world who could play the harmonica out of his ear. I explained that I must hold my nose tightly with my left hand to get pressure needed to blow out of my ear. Hidden in the palm of my left hand was a tiny harmonica. With my right hand, I held a regular harmonica against my ear. With much theatrical effort, I convincingly produced a note that indeed



seemed to come out of my ear. I then slipped the tiny harmonica into my mouth and showed them that I had nothing in my hands.

Kids normally react with suspicious giggling and enthusiasm trying to figure out how I did it. In the end, I always share the magic by exposing the tiny harmonica in my mouth and playing a tune on it. Since their lessons are about to begin, I never want to lose their trust as a teacher. Moreover, I don't want them to blow out their eardrums trying to pull it off!

An interesting thing happened in Indonesia. Each time when I do this illusion in my sessions, I first ask "who believes that I can play a harmonica out of my ear?" The kids almost always respond with great skepticism and amusement. Almost never does a hand go up. However, without exception when I ask the kids who had survived the disasters of Nias and Aceh, they all raised their hands believing that I could do this. Nobody doubted me. One boy in fact, excitedly yelled out "I believe! I believe!" as if in response to an evangelical sermon. Even after I shared my secret, there were kids holding their harmonicas to their ears to try it. Not only did this blow the punch line of the illusion, it baffled me. As I turned to Mr. Bayu, I asked, "How could they believe in such an impossible thing?" Bayu replied, "Gary, these kids believe in you. You showed up from far away to entertain them and gave them harmonicas. No one has ever done such a thing. The very fact that they have survived and are here today is a miracle! These are kids who are ready to believe in miracles."

Project Coordinator, Natasha Phillips witnessed all of the sessions and offers her perspective:



Gary Allegretto had the children entertained for hours, some still wanting to play through their ears.

"The children were empowered with a visible sense of self worth and satisfaction upon receipt of the harmonicas. Adults in the room would try to snatch the harmonicas from the children in a beggar's mentality. Allegretto would not stand for this and managed to enforce respect from the adults for his wishes. I saw the children accepting perhaps for the first time in their lives that they were worth something. They were important enough for this American to come all the way over to give them a Harmonica and teach them how to play it. This proved as important as any other aid that would keep them alive. Harmonikids resuscitated their failing spirits. It was validated."

"Though Harmonikids has no religious affiliations, we shared ourselves through Christian, Muslim, Buddhist and Islamic Fundamentalist orphanages & refugee camps. There was a session in a Refugee Camp in Aceh where the children inside the camp were segregated from those playing in the streets. Allegretto insisted that no children could be left out. The leaders of the refugee camp did not want the children outside to participate. Allegretto insisted and they begrudgingly invited the other children to join in music. When the children began to play "Shave and a Haircut", all differences and barriers separating them were instantly dissolved. Suddenly they were just a room full of happy children playing songs together. When we departed we traveled down the road to the priceless sound of music and children's laughter that had clearly been missing from the village since the Tsunami. Harmonikids gave them the vehicle to be children again. They had forgotten how."

"Several teachers and principals from other areas attended a session that Allegretto was conducting. Obviously there was a "buzz" going around about Harmonikids activities. Upon conclusion of the session the Principal thanked Allegretto for teaching them too. Allegretto got in amongst the children and interacted with human touch and emotion. His accessibility and commitment brought the kids together in song. The principals said that they had learned a new and unique way of teaching from him: rather than teach AT the children – learn WITH them."

"One of the orphanages we visited had forty orphans who had been together in the recent devastating Nias Island earthquake that had killed so many. Their Orphanage had been leveled...three stories crumbled to the ground. They showed us the photos of the destruction including the bunk beds in which the kids slept when the earthquake struck. Tentatively, we asked how many were lost. Miraculously, they replied "None. You are teaching them all today".

The last orphanage we attended housed orphans from both Aceh and Nias Island. Incredibly, some of them had witnessed and survived BOTH disasters. They had suffered the trauma of having dramatically lost everything except for their lives – twice.

During the session a cloud of sadness lifted in the house and the air was filled

with joy and laughter. In a touching moment before we left, the children insisted on saying a prayer for our health and safety. I was moved to tears that in the aftermath of the unfathomable turmoil they had faced, they were concerned with OUR well being.

Often giving to special needs children brings gifts to your own life. Accordingly, the children I reached in North Sumatra have deeply inspired me with their courage and capacity for acceptance and recovery. They have reminded me to never take life for granted. In turn, I believe that my organization nurtured their spirits through the joyous gift of music. True, I had given them harmonicas, not food, shelter, or medical care. However, having received those necessities they desperately needed to return to being children again. Harmonikids gave the children an opportunity to recover some of the childhood joy and dreams that had been swept away from them and lost under the endless rubble of the tsunami disaster.

What they've been saying...

"...There is always a crowd in the atrium with everybody playing their harmonicas and making beautiful music...The ultimate goal is to help diminish some of the stress the guest families experience...The effect is magical and immediate with music."

**-Mike Elias, Manager,
The Ronald McDonald House
Los Angeles, CA**

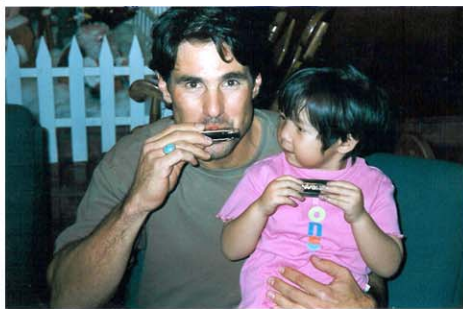
"You have a wonderful gift for teaching and interacting with children, making each and every one of them feel very special. ...and were full of praise for them. We were all amazed at how quickly the children picked up the songs. It was lovely watching them all so intent on learning to play and your warm encouragement helped them all feel they would be successful. Several of the children who took part in your class played the harmonicas around the corridors for days after the session...and were so proud of themselves. I'm sure it's something they will never forget."

**Debra Fowler, Public Relations
The Children's Hospital, Westmead, Australia**

"The children both in the House and on the ward enjoyed it so very much...I believe your contribution to their health has been enormous. 'Tom', the young 15 year old continued to play the harmonica through complications after his bone marrow transplant. The harmonica gave him such a sense of achievement and so much self-confidence. You remember his mother cry-

ing with joy as she listened to his playing; well, she has stopped crying now and is looking forward to the day when he joins in at the country and western music festival at Tamworth next year..."

**Penny Douglas, Manager
Ronald McDonald House, Randwick,
Australia**



"The events at Ronald McDonald House are designed to entertain our kids. But sometimes they take away something new that's a gift for a lifetime...like learning to play a musical instrument. Harmonikids brings a special brand of TLC to kids who need some music in their hearts...Gary brought sheet music & harmonicas and taught our kids old favorites like "You are my Sunshine" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star".

...Everyone had a great time and the living room was filled with the joyous and always on-key, sounds of music thanks to Harmonikids."

**Ralph Vogel, Director
Ronald McDonald House, New York City**

Our Mission

The purpose of Harmonikids is to provide harmonicas to special needs children (i.e., disabled, handicapped, abused, neglected, orphaned, under privileged, traumatized, emotionally disturbed, retarded, autistic, hospitalized, suffering from an illness or disease, requiring medical care, terminally ill) and teach them to play simple songs through gentle instruction. This provides both an educational and entertaining activity for children with tremendous physical and emotional challenges.

Award winning harmonica player, Gary Allegretto founded Harmonikids over 15 years ago. He has been playing for over 35 years. Hohner, the world's top harmonica manufacturer, endorses him. He has performed on stages world wide, television, radio and film soundtracks and released a critically acclaimed CD. Gary has taught harmonica to both children and adults in workshops across the United States.

"After dedicating much of my time over the years teaching special needs children to play the harmonica, I have seen the tremendous benefits children receive by focusing on their abilities – not their disabilities. I have discovered that the healing power of music can be found just below a Harmonikid's nose.

Gary Allegretto
BOARD OF DIRECTORS
Gary Allegretto - Founding Director
Patti Duce - Secretary
Chiara DiGeronimo - Treasurer
Natasha Phillips - Project Coordinator

Harmonikids is a 501(c)3 non profit organization. Your tax-deductible donations enable us to keep helping special needs kids...all around the world.

**Donations may be sent to:
Harmonikids
2144 Beech Knoll Road
Los Angeles California 90046**

