

Songs for the ages



Music Together class bridges generations

BY KATIE RILEY

On a winter morning in Annapolis, the joyful voices of both children and adults singing can be heard through the hallways of Atria Manresa, a retirement community overlooking the Severn River in Annapolis.

In the activities room, music instructor Jeanne Calderon strums a folk song on her guitar. “Everyone join in,” she encourages, as more than two dozen participants move, sing and clap along to the beat.

Kids ranging in age from babies to 5-year-olds march with their parents around the room, while the other participants — residents of Atria Manresa — clap along from their seats and wheelchairs, clearly delighted with their younger counterparts.

The group meets as part of Music Together’s Intergenerational Music class, which aims to connect young children, parents and seniors through music. Each week, participants gather for 45 minutes of music appreciation, but it is the power of music to bridge generations that makes the

experience so special.

Jen Mendez of Upper Marlboro says the class has given her family something extraordinary.

“We wanted to bring music into our home, to make it a part of our daily lives,” she says of enrolling her children, Antonio, 4, and Lucia, 2, in the program. “This class has allowed our family to cultivate relationships. It has taught my children caring and compassion, and we have definitely become attached to some residents. We love it.”

Music Together is an internationally recognized music program that promotes community-building through music. It offers a multitude of music and instrumental classes, but the Intergenerational Music class takes music outreach to another level.

“The class is certainly unique, and all of the participants, from residents to parent and child, are fully engaged,” says Calderon, who teaches the class through her early childhood music organization, Move and Groove. Move and Groove is a local company that provides the Chesapeake region’s Music Together national curriculum.

THE POWER OF MUSIC

Research shows that music can significantly impact the

lives of the elderly, boost quality of life and can help prevent depression. In 2010, Boston University scientists released a study showing that music can promote information and memory retention in those suffering from Alzheimer’s or dementia.

“Music is a natural part of human development,” Calderon says. “It is something that all ages can enjoy.” In her three years teaching the class, Calderon has witnessed the benefits firsthand. “Some staff at Manresa have said that they’ve never seen certain residents so engaged,” she says.

KEY FOR THE KIDS

The class begins by singing the “Hello” song as Calderon introduces each child, parent and senior by name. Everyone in the class wears nametags to promote interaction, though many families and seniors have been attending since the class began three years ago. The class incorporates reading, instruments and pretend play for the kids,

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and many songs encourage movement and arm motions that residents can do while seated.

"The class has a lot of layers. I love that it focuses on various musical aspects and emphasizes language skills," says fellow Music Together instructor Christine Brimhall, who has brought her daughters, Hayley, 4, and Alexa, 3, to the class. "I have taught the class myself, and I see how the residents light up."

Some residents are regular attendees, while others stop in briefly to partake in the merriment.

"Aren't they just adorable?" says a woman watching the children from the doorway.

It's clear the class is a highlight for many, as residents and staff alike greet families as they arrive and depart. Many of the residents are in wheelchairs, but that doesn't hold them back from clapping, waving and playing instruments as the children move about the room. The joyful

atmosphere is evident, and the kids frequently stop to talk to the residents they refer to as "our friends."

"Hi Mr. Richard," says Antonio, approaching a familiar face. "I'm wearing my superhero shirt today."

Calderon plays an instrumental tune as children pass out musical instruments — another opportunity to say hello. Josh Cohen, 2, distributes egg shakers, grinning as the residents greet him by name.

"We have made some real connections," says his mom, Robyn Cohen of Crofton. "I wanted to teach my son respect for the elderly, and he now views them as friends wherever we go. This class, these residents, they are my son's great-grandparent family."

PERFECT HARMONY

Amy Maddox, engaged life director of Atria Manresa, says the class offers residents the opportunity to engage on a different level.

"The residents enjoy the music, but they definitely come to see the kids.

They bond together and it's exciting to watch their relationships grow. Many children come back to visit regularly," she says. "They just love it."

Indeed, students and parents often develop ongoing friendships with residents that extend far beyond the semester class.

"My favorite part of this class is drawing pictures to bring to the people who live here," Antonio Mendez says.

Calderon ends the class with a soft tune that prompts the youngest participants to climb in parents' laps. Before saying goodbye, the children collect instruments and walk around giving final high-fives and handshakes, with the promise of seeing each other next week.

"When you see the pleasure that everyone gets out of it each time, it's a real gift," Calderon says. "This class — this is the joy of my week."

For more information about Music Together Chesapeake's Intergenerational Music class, call 301-262-9538 or visit movengroove.net.

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