

Bluegrass Christmas

Musicians put unique sound to holiday carols for kids at hospitals, adults in assisted living



DECEMBER 24, 2012 12:00 AM • [GERALD M. GAY ARIZONA DAILY STAR](#)

Members of the Desert Bluegrass Association acted as Santa's little helpers during a recent Friday engagement on the Tucson Medical Center campus.

With mandolins, guitars and other stringed instruments in hand, the group serenaded families with holiday favorites and high lonesome melodies in the waiting room of the Children's Clinics in the

Square and Compass building, which specializes in helping kids with complex medical issues such as spina bifida and epilepsy.

The musicians were playing second fiddle to Santa Claus, who was taking photos with visitors, and a room full of free toys reserved for an estimated 1,300 patients and their siblings.

Yet the sounds of the holidays, songs such as "Silent Night" and "Jingle Bells" performed with a bluegrass twist, seemed to resonate with many of those who walked through the door.

Children and their families watched the players, about 16 or so, from brightly colored, rounded couches, while nurses and support staff members took occasional breaks to listen to the music.

"It kind of puts everybody in the mood for Christmas," said Nanette E. Stone, who stopped in to pick up a present and get blood work done for her 6-year-old son, Dawson.

"Dawson just loves it."

Paul "Doc" Simpson was looking for that kind of reaction when he started the association's bluegrass caroling program two years ago.

As association president, Simpson wanted a way to give back to the community using his stable of more than 250 association members, many of whom were well-versed in playing bluegrass music.

One of the group's earliest engagements was at the Diamond Children's Medical Center on North Campbell Avenue.

So far this year, they've performed at seven different facilities, including an Emeritus assisted

living and retirement community branch on East Speedway and the Ronald McDonald House, also on North Campbell.

Their final engagement of the season will take place today back at the Diamond Center.

Simpson, a mandolin player who works as a criminal forensic psychologist, said the reaction to the caroling has always been positive, no matter the age of the audience.

"For the kids, it is fascinating, because it is a very different sound that they have not encountered," he said. "Older folks actually know some of the traditional songs. We play, and they already know them by heart."

Simpson said the caroling is just as comforting to the musicians as it is for the players.

Marlene Moldenhauer, 54, took time off from her job as an accounting manager at the University of Arizona and drove all the way from Oro Valley to play upright bass at the Children's Clinics gig.

This was Moldenhauer's first year volunteering with the program.

"I like going out and doing this because of what it does for other people," she said. "We are playing for people who are not always feeling well, and they still leave smiling. It is a little bit of happiness in their day."

The experience can be just as special for audience members, Simpson said.

Monika Chavez brought her daughter, Emillya Tate, to the clinic for a Christmas present, but requested that the musicians play "Jingle Bells" after she noticed Emillya enjoying the music as much as her free gift.

Simpson sweetened the deal by giving the 6-year-old girl, who has cerebral palsy, a set of bells to play during the song.

"She was really excited for it," Chavez said. "I was surprised when they gave her the bells. Her face just lit up."

"We are playing for people who are not always feeling well, and they still leave smiling. It is a little bit of happiness in their day."

Marlene Moldenhauer, musician

Contact reporter Gerald M. Gay at ggay@azstarnet.com or 807-8430.