

Music Memories embraces the power of song

By ERIN ELLIOTT
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It's impossible not to smile, sing or even dance when Barbara Lee Friedman and Cheri Sykes bring their Music Memories program to area seniors. At a performance May 3 at the Deikel Family AlterCare Adult Day Program on the Sholom Community Alliance campus in St. Louis Park, Friedman and Sykes entertained approximately 20 program participants, family members and AlterCare staff with lively renditions of songs from a bygone era.

From "Sunny Side of the Street" to "Put on a Happy Face" to "Hinei Ma Tov," Friedman and Sykes encourage singing, clapping, dancing and storytelling.

"Over the Rainbow," for example, inspired a story by one of the participants who said he was delivered by the same Grand Rapids, Minn., doctor that delivered Judy Garland. He even remembered the doctor's name.

"Wait, wait, wait," Friedman said. "Your baby doctor was the same baby doctor that delivered Judy Garland?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Can I have your autograph?"

Throughout the hour-long performance, Friedman circled the room countless times, often sitting with participants and asking questions. She referred to each person by name.

"People are bored, lonely and forgotten," Friedman said. "Whether they're in assisted living, independent living or nursing homes, people aren't visited enough or accepted enough for who they are."

Friedman first began playing music in nursing homes with her father when she was 12 years old.

"My dad would talk to people afterward and ask, 'How far back do you remember?'" Friedman said. "I'm 12 years old listening to these stories of people... I was beside myself. It really influenced my life's work. I pretty much, from then, was singing in nursing homes."

When Friedman started Music Memories in 1991 as a for-profit organization, she searched for sponsors to help her hire additional musicians. Playing songs from the 1940s, she wanted to recreate a "big-band" sound.



Mordecai Spektor
Barbara Lee Friedman, left, and Cheri Sykes, right, want to expand their Music Memories program.



Mordecai Spektor
Barbara Lee Friedman, left, entertains Olive Johnson, Sykes' aunt, in the Deikel Family AlterCare Adult Day Program.

But, financially, Friedman couldn't get the business to work, so she reorganized Music Memories as a non-profit organization in 1996. With donations from foundations and individual donors, she is able to hire other musicians and develop the Mini-Maestro program that brings youth who play instruments into nursing homes.

In addition to nursing homes and long-term care facilities, Friedman provides one-on-one entertainment for participants in assisted living or memory care units. Friedman also offers personalized entertainment for birthdays, anniversaries, reunions and weddings, and "This is Your Life in Song" for ages one to 105.

"Barbara Lee Friedman and ensemble added so much fun to my 75th and 85th birthday parties, that I've already booked them for my 90th," Amos Heilicher said in an advertisement.

Friedman met Sykes, a classically trained church musician, through a mutual friend more than a year ago, and they performed together the first night they spoke. Sykes also plays the

guitar, but her specialty is hymns in the "Boogie-Woogie" piano style.

"Jazz piano is really my passion," Sykes said. "I see [Music Memories] as an extension of the ministry dimension of my calling."

During the performance at AlterCare, Sykes even provided some early music history and demonstrated many different musical styles on the piano.

"We complement each other," Sykes said. "Barbara's a singer and a comedian and an entertainer. She's the extrovert of us, but I'm the pianist, so I think it makes a really complementary team. And, we both have that common vision of serving the needs of the elderly."

Sykes' family has sponsored Music Memories for eight more performances over 16 weeks at AlterCare.

"We love the music of that era that they relate to," Sykes said. "The music of that era is just so classic. It's fun to have a place where the people really appreciate hearing those songs. We want to do them in the style they were originally intended."

Ending their May 3 performance with "Hava Nagila," several participants in the AlterCare program rose from their seats and started dancing. Even Laura Philbrook, AlterCare's program director and a high school classmate of Friedman's, was driven to sing and dance.

"Oh, we have to stop," Friedman said, laughing. "We're having too much fun here."

For information about Music Memories, call 612-926-8648, e-mail: barbaralee@musicmemories.org or visit: www.musicmemories.org.

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