

Oro Valley

Living

Start the New Year with Joy

By Korene Charnofsky Cohen



If one of your New Year's resolutions is to make other people happy, then start the year by taking a cue from Gestures of Joy, a group of ladies who brighten the day wherever they go.

These women (aged 65 to 90) are residents of Splendido, a retirement community in Oro Valley. They put on a show combining music and sign language, with a little dancing thrown in for good measure. They bring this special brand of entertainment to places like hospitals, churches, nursing homes, other retirement communities and schools. The Gestures of Joy ladies have performed in public places including the restaurant North, and they hope to give more public performances.

The group got its start when Sarah Bugden, a former director of wellness, was looking for a way for people to be physically active and get a brain workout, all while remaining seated.

"She was the inspiration for Gestures of Joy," said Jan Rogers, a member of the group since it began in 2008. Bugden came up with the idea of doing sign language to songs. "We do get exercise even though we are seated," Rogers emphasized. "We do a lot of arm motions, and some of us get up and dance." The group will be starting 2011 with a new director, Margaret Erlebach, who also is the assistant director of programs for Sonora at Splendido, a nursing-care facility.

The ladies dress in black outfits with white gloves and shoes, but they wear different hats for different songs. Their repertoire consists of about 26 songs ranging from religious and holiday music to popular music, including songs by Michael Jackson and the group ABBA.

"People think we just sign to the music, but we also dance, and we find ways to involve the audience in the show,"



The Gestures of Joy performed in front of the restaurant North at La Encantada mall in May 2010.

Rogers said. "At one nursing home, there was a lady who came up to us and said that she was inspired to quit being a couch potato and get up and do something positive." Rogers said children also really enjoy the show, and the group receives thank-you notes from the kids.

"At Painted Sky Elementary School, the kids treated us like rock stars and wanted to high-five us when we went out into the audience," she noted.

Paula Sellergren, Splendido's director of marketing, said there currently are 20 members of Gestures of Joy, and they give about 25 performances a year. The program is 45 minutes long and, in addition to signing, the women play tambourines, and some of the members do free-style dancing while "playing" fake guitars. The music is always upbeat, and the sign language – a combination of American Sign Language and American Indian Sign Language – is always synchronized. All members of the group are volunteers, and they never charge for a performance.

"The participants do some of their own promotion, but people hear about Gestures of Joy mainly by word of mouth, and they receive requests for the show from many places," Sellergren said. They recently gave a holiday performance for residents of Splendido.



From left: Maxine Pearson, Jacque Montrose (front row), Christenson (front row), Phyllis Carey, Pat Linder (front row) Patty Kizzier, Inez

"This group is an expression of all forms of wellness," said Rogers. "Along with providing us with a form of physical fitness, it helps us emotionally by improving morale through creating positive attitudes, being spiritually uplifting and being a great social activity." It is especially satisfying for the members of the group to bring happiness to children, but they find themselves emotionally affected when performing at hospitals. They say they find a special spiritual connection when they sign along to songs performed at a church.

So how hard is it to learn these routines? Learning sign language, then the songs, then learning to sign to the songs and synchronize the performance seems like hard work to me.

"No one has ever complained about this being difficult to learn," said Rogers, "especially with a talented director."

Rogers pointed out that many songs have repeated words such as "love," "care" and "soul," and this helps cut down on the number of words the performers need to learn. Also, they are not extremely rigid about the performance and do not necessarily sign for every word in the song. Some of the women have experience with dance, music, directing and producing. Rogers is putting her 12 years of childhood dance lessons to good use, and she said she has always loved to dance. The group practices about one hour per week, and it usually

takes about three, one-hour rehearsals to learn a song.

Gestures of Joy is not Rogers's only activity. She has lived in Oro Valley for 18 years, and she moved into Splendido in 2007. She is on Splendido's marketing panel, attends classes on various topics, takes part in plays, and adds to her wellness lifestyle with fitness and dance classes. She also has run seven fashion shows at Splendido, with residents as the models.

Aside from performing with Gestures of Joy, Rogers gives back to the community by taking her schnoodle dog (part schnauzer, part poodle) to visit patients at the Sonora at Splendido nursing-care facility. "The people are always pleased to have a friendly dog come to visit," she said.

"While we have had standing ovations for Gestures of Joy, we feel like we get back more than we give," said Rogers. "We give our time and energy, and it is mentally and physically stimulating; but more than that, we have formed a bond of friendship." For more information on upcoming performances or to request



From left: Helen Starr, Jan Rogers (front row), Carol Beaton, Luella Krutka, Patricia Owens (with hat)

a performance, contact the group by calling Splendido at 520-878-2600.