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UPCOMING EVENTS

Peer Gynt
Tuesday, February 5th
7:30pm - 10:00pm

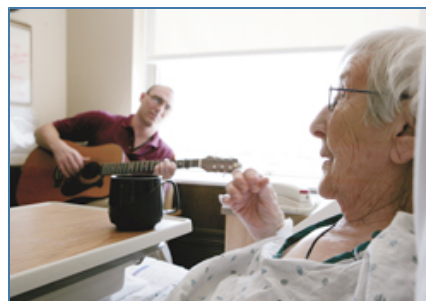
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Soothing patients with songs

BY MARY O'REGAN

Linden Hills man serenades cancer patients at Fairview Southdale Hospital



An elderly man hunches over his dinner tray in the oncology ward of Fairview Southdale Hospital. He's wearing a hospital gown and scooping food into his mouth as his wife hovers in the doorway, scanning the area around the nurse's station. Diedrich Weiss, a local volunteer, passes in the hallway, guitar in his hands, and her face lights up. "My husband wanted to say thank you," she says, gesturing at her sick spouse.

The man stops eating, looks up and agrees, "Music therapy is always good."

Weiss, 37, has been volunteering at the Edina hospital once a week for the past five months. He lives in Linden Hills as a self-employed guitar teacher and producer, and a few years ago, found himself yearning for another way to use his musical talent. "I just needed to do something with something I loved that had nothing to do with money," he explains. "I felt like, for me to have a worthwhile relationship with music, it had to do something with contributing to other people."

Each Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., Weiss fulfills his moral calling. He heads to the eighth floor of the sprawling medical campus and starts out in the hallway, strumming on his acoustic guitar for staff and patients. After a while, he selects two or three patients' rooms - randomly or by request - and gives private performances, often peppered with chitchat.

Overall, patients, staff and visitors love Weiss' serenades. "You can see the noise level and what happens on the floor completely change," says Jodi Wiczorek, one of the oncology nurses.

With a short buzzed haircut and face full of freckles, Weiss is sensitive to the mood of the ward; he adjusts his tempos and keys accordingly.

As a regular visitor to the hospital, Weiss frequently deals with death. In only a few months, he's accumulated numerous stories about making new friends, only to return a week later to an empty bed. In one instance, Weiss befriended a terminally ill man in his early 40s named Tim.

"He was sharing his innermost thoughts about what was going to happen to him when his body ceases to work," Weiss recalls.

Wiczorek explains that patients often see staff and volunteers as a safe outlet for feelings that might be difficult to share with friends and family.

"There's a freedom in that exchange somehow," Weiss says, referring to his ability to be both a stranger and confidant. He developed an especially close bond with Tim when, a week after their conversation, Tim brought in his own guitar for a duet.

"One of his regrets was that he didn't get to experience his potential as a musician," Weiss remembers. "He's an extraordinary musician. I mean, he was good."

They moved into the hallway, Tim wearing his isolation mask, and together, began to play. Weiss took the rhythm parts while Tim held his own on the lead melody. They slid into numerous keys, playing up-tempo and slow tunes, covering folk, blue grass, jazz, and blues. After a while, a crowd gathered on the ward. Word spread around the hospital and people came from different levels, drawn to the music like mice to the Pied Piper. They played for well over an hour.

"My hands were killing me," Weiss smiles. But he didn't want to stop until Tim had gotten his fill. "It was the strangest kind of feeling of 'Not yet, not yet, not yet.'"

Eventually, they wrapped up their set and the crowd disbursed. Weiss knew that he had given Tim a powerful gift: playing guitar for an audience one last time. "I was bearing witness to his ability, from musician to musician," Weiss says. When he returned to the hospital a week later, Tim had died, and Weiss learned a sad lesson.

The new Home of Dr. David Whiting

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Guest Chef: Brian T. McElrath, Chocolatier
Saturday, February 9th
1:00pm

Minnesota Parent's Camp Fair
Saturday, March 8th
10:00am - 2:00pm

It's such a strange phenomenon, that whole sense of the human spirit wanting to just actualize what they're most passionate about," he says. "You've got to do what you love; do not screw around [S] I'll probably be thinking about Tim for a long time."

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