

July 26, 2003

WOWING THEM WITH SONGS, SMILES, SOPHISTICATION

Author: PAM KELLEY, STAFF WRITER

Edition: ONE-THREE

Section: MAIN

Page: 1A

Estimated printed pages: 4



GAYLE SHOMER - STAFF PHOTO. Singer Anthony Cirillo of Huntersville congratulates Cypress resident Ruth Roberson for turning 100 years old in June. Cirillo entertains the elderly at continuing-care retirement communities, assisted-living centers and nursing homes.

Article Text:

Men certainly like Anthony Cirillo. But it's women who love him.

They smile when he sings to them, giggle when he kisses their hands. They call him sophisticated and smooth, and once in a while, someone like Beulah Poovey, who recently watched Cirillo perform in Hickory, comes right out and says what's on her mind: "He's good-looking!"

Anthony Cirillo is a crooner in an interesting entertainment industry niche - entertaining the elderly at continuing-care retirement communities, assisted-living centers and nursing homes.

Many long-term care facilities can't afford to hire entertainers. They depend on volunteers. But some activity directors have hired more professional entertainers in recent years as budgets have increased and residents have become more discerning. Demand will grow, they say, as baby boomers age into long-term facilities.

Cirillo, 46, lives in Huntersville and has sung in bands since he was a south Philadelphia teenager. For decades, entertaining was a hobby that bordered on a second job.

But he didn't perform for seniors in an institutional setting until the mid-'90s. Then a marketing and public relations director at a New Jersey hospital, he sang for people who attended the hospital's adult day care center.

The audience liked it, and that performance led to others. With his health-care background, Cirillo knew that residents in long-term care were a growing market. And he realized that he loved entertaining them. "I see them come alive during performances," he says. "I don't know where else you find that kind of fulfillment."

A wide repertoire Cirillo was between songs at Hickory's Brian Center nursing home in the Viewmont area recently when he got a request. "Do you know 'The Utah Trail'?" a 95-year-old woman asked.

He didn't know that one, but he knows 1,000 others, all accompanied by recorded orchestra music. He can do Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, a whole hour of Sinatra. He also throws in newer music - songs from George Harrison and Barry Manilow, because residents remember those songs, too.

Cirillo launched his full-time entertainment career in 2001, after he and his wife, Kathy, moved to Huntersville. Today, he regularly travels to nursing homes and assisted-living centers in the Carolinas, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Florida. In the last few years, he's performed at some 200 facilities. Many facilities book him regularly.

A couple of decades ago, it was rare that a nursing home would pay someone to entertain residents. But much has changed. For one thing, the profession of the activity director - the person who arranges entertainment and activities for residents - has evolved and grown more sophisticated.

When the profession first developed 20 years ago, an activity director was lucky to get money for craft supplies, says Kim Burleson, president of the N.C. Activity Professional Association. When she entered the field 13 years ago, "you just didn't hire someone to come in," she says.

Today, though, residents want more than school-group performances. "If I didn't bring in good quality, I'd be shot and run out on a rail," says Diane Mockbee, an Arizona activity director and National Association of Activity Professionals board member.

She's hired Dean Martin sound-alikes, classical pianists, Hawaiian dancers. She usually steers clear of comedians, because their acts tend to flop with people who have hearing problems or dementia.

Even for Cirillo, audiences can present challenges. At the Brian Center, for instance, he was midway through a dramatic reading of "Casey at the Bat." Casey had just taken his second strike and tension was building nicely when a 95-year-old woman - the same one who'd requested "The Utah Trail" - yelled, "Strike three! You're out!"

Without missing a beat, Cirillo leaned down to the woman's ear and said in a stage whisper, "We're not there yet."

"I'll pretty much run with anything that happens," he says. He doesn't even take offense if an audience member falls asleep. This is good, because it happens often. But while some residents nod off, Cirillo's music seems to restore others. Often, people who've lost language and seldom talk are the ones belting out tunes along with him. Even when a stroke has hampered speech, "the music just flows right out," says Kathy Williams, the Brian Center's activity director. "They can sing a lot better than they can talk."

Cirillo says his time in long-term care facilities has taught him volumes about life. He's now completing a book based on his experiences. Due out later this year and titled, "Who Moved My Dentures?," it tells the stories of resilient people who've adapted to old age. He's hoping to dispel negative misconceptions about the long-term care industry.

At The Cypress, a continuing-care retirement community in south Charlotte, residents enjoy Cirillo so much that the facility books him every other month. Cirillo usually finds at least one member of every audience who banters with him, and on a recent day, it was a 100-year-old woman who brought chuckles when she described how she makes

wrinkles disappear: She rubs Vaseline on her mirror before she looks at herself.

As residents sipped wine and ate shrimp cocktail in the dining room, he switched from comedy to a more romantic mood with "Love Letters in the Sand:"

On a day like today
We passed the time away
Writing love letters in the sand
In the audience, a man slipped his arm around his wife's shoulder and rubbed her arm.
How you laughed when I cried
Each time I saw the tide
Take our love letters from the sand

The dining room was too bright to be a nightclub, but just for a moment, it felt like one.

Pam Kelley: (704) 358-5271; pkelley@charlotteobserver.com.

Want To Know More?

Anthony Cirillo is selling a CD, "Songs for a Rainy Night," \$14.99, on his Web site, anthonyssong.com.

Copyright (c) 2003 The Charlotte Observer
Record Number: 0307260021

[About Us](#) [Products](#) [Calendar](#) [Book Us](#) [Mail List](#) [Activity Professionals](#)
[Corporate Services](#) [Author and Speaking Engagements](#) [Arts and Healing](#)
[Free Stuff](#) [Links](#) [Guest Book](#) [Contact Us](#) [Home](#)

Copyright 2004 Anthony's Song, LLC
