

HOME

SPECIAL SECTIONS

- [Classifieds](#)
- [Real Estate](#)
- [Employment](#)
- [Automotive](#)

- [Auto Gallery](#)
- [Home Show](#)

NEWS

- [News Stories](#)
- [Business](#)
- [News Briefs](#)
- [News Calendars](#)
- [News Columns](#)
- [Obituaries](#)
- [Today's Photos](#)

LIVING

- [Living Stories](#)
- [Living Columns](#)
- [Celebrations](#)
- [Health Matters](#)
- [Movies](#)

OPINION

- [Editorials](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Guest Columns](#)
- [Forums](#)

SPORTS

- [Sports Stories](#)
- [Sports Briefs](#)
- [Sports Columns](#)
- [Sports Calendars](#)

INFORMATION

- [Online Forms](#)
- [Advertising Rates](#)
- [Staff Directory](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Contact Us](#)
- [Home Delivery](#)

July 09, 2004 12:00AM

Singer brightens the day at Centerclair

BY ERIC FRAZIER
The Dispatch

If some in his audience were unable to lift their arms and applaud his performance of "Rock Around the Clock" Thursday morning at Centerclair Nursing Home, Anthony Cirillo understood. Entertaining residents at long-term care facilities is his specialty.

With a repertoire of about 1,000 songs, a quick wit and a perpetual twinkle in his eyes, the vocalist delights in involving those who can in clapping, dancing and singing the lyrics of familiar tunes that spark fond memories.

"I find it very fulfilling," Cirillo explained. "It's immediately gratifying. You can see the difference you make in people's lives."

LaDale Dennis, Centerclair's activity director, said keeping the 64 residents there active and entertained is a challenge. Most are in their 80s. Volunteers, both individuals and church groups, help out, but professionals who cater to long-term care and assisted-living facilities are not common.

"I had a hard time getting him," Dennis said. "He's hard to book because he travels so much."

Cirillo performed more than 200 shows last year. His bookings span the East Coast from New York to Florida. He travels by car, setting up his own equipment - loudspeakers, mixing console, microphones and a Dell laptop computer with his musical accompaniment stored digitally.

"I have the whole orchestra in that computer except the cymbals," he told his audience when he played the "1812 Overture." Then he engaged everyone in raising their arms to simulate the cymbal crashes as he added verbal sound effects.

Cirillo tailors each performance to the audience, season and occasion. He highlighted July with patriotic and summertime tunes Thursday. On some songs, he enlisted the staff's help, with the uniformed workers forming a



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Entertainer Anthony Cirillo (right) of Huntersville and Centerclair Nursing Home staff member Joyce Jolly play air guitar during one of Cirillo's songs performed for delighted residents of the center Thursday morning. (DONNIE ROBERTS/THE DISPATCH)

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marching line for "76 Trombones" and kicking up their heels like the Rockettes on "New York, New York."

His delivery is lighthearted and spontaneous as he gauges the audience reaction, banters with them and responds to the unexpected. While singing Perry Como's "Hot Diggity (Dog Ziggity Boom)," Cirillo's wireless microphone started to fail, and he didn't miss a beat, changing the lyrics to "I need a new battery."

He started his musical career as a teenager in south Philadelphia. He has played in rock and roll bands at casinos, nightclubs, weddings and private parties.

Ten years ago, when he was working as a marketing and public relations professional at a hospital, the director of an adult medical day care program asked him to sing for the clients. He enjoyed it and saw an opportunity.

"Being a marketing person, I saw this as a niche that not too many people are filling," he said.

When he followed his wife's relocation to North Carolina with a major corporation nearly three years ago, he became an independent marketing consultant and stepped up his performance schedule. They make their home in Huntersville.

Not only is Cirillo an entertainer, he is an author and advocate for elder health care issues. In March, he self-published his first book, "Who Moved My Dentures." It is a collection of stories about older adults he has met while performing.

He said his goal in writing the book was to dispel myths about life in long-term care facilities and to provide useful information about the industry for families and caregivers. Cirillo has also recorded one compact disc entitled "Songs for a Rainy Night." Both are available on his Web site: <http://www.anthonysong.com/>. He has plans to produce a series of themed video programs of his shows that activity directors can present anytime.

As Cirillo stayed busy selling and autographing books and CDs after his show Thursday, Mary Elizabeth Cornwell offered her assessment.

"I loved it," said the longtime resident who turned 66 Saturday. "I thought it was wonderful. I'd like for him to come back."

Dennis said she would like to schedule Cirillo for another performance near the Christmas holidays.

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