

Local Accordion Player Completes Salute to Health Care Workers

By Abby Luby

They say music can heal body and soul and Montrose resident Don Simons has actively proved that adage for 500 days.

During the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic, Simons was, like the rest of us, amazed at the resiliency and dedication of first responders and health care workers as they risked their own health to help people suffering from the virus.

Simons was initially inspired by New York City residents banging pots and pans from their terraces and open windows for first responders during the pandemic's earliest days. He grabbed his accordion, stepped out on his driveway on Tommy Thurber Lane and started playing.

Last Thursday, Day 500 was the last of his live music tribute. Accompanied by three other musicians for the final performance Simons serenaded the neighborhood with polkas, torch songs, waltzes and rock 'n' roll.

As skies darkened from an incoming storm, Simons set up music stands and amplifiers inside his garage. A drizzle didn't stop about 20 people from sitting under two canopies or in their cars with the windows open to hear him play.



Don Simons playing his last of 500 consecutive evening concerts last Thursday honoring health care workers and first responders in the garage of his Montrose home.

"Maybe I should play 'Stormy Weather,'" he said.

Simons, 81, grew up in South Dakota and began learning the accordion when he was 10. A retired computer engineer, he and his wife, Dagmar, have five children and 14 grandchildren.

For about the last 25 years, Simons and a fellow accordionist have played at nursing homes and local celebrations. When the pandemic put a halt to those concerts, Simons was driven to play



ABBY LUBY PHOTOS

Montrose resident Don Simons played with son Rich Simons and drummer Phil Battison.

for his homebound neighbors to show support for those on the front lines.

Simons posted a sign at the end of his driveway that said "Salute!! To Care Givers and First Responders. 6 p.m. daily."

Those very first accordion notes rang out in the neighborhood on St. Patrick's Day 2020.

"When I played, some would drive up and park along the curb to listen before driving on," Simons recalled. "People a couple of blocks away would come for the evening serenade. Some would come from the nearby park."

Inspiration kept Simons going, especially on bitter cold days when it snowed, forcing him to turn on two small heaters in his garage and put up a makeshift barrier to keep the snow out.

"Some days I didn't feel like playing because it was too cold," he said. "But all I had to think about was at that very moment somebody was going on a work shift where they didn't know what they would encounter but knew it wasn't going to be pleasant. I wanted to let them know we care for them."

Joining Simons last Thursday night was Phil Battison on drums

and harmonizing vocals; Otto Stierli, vocals and guitar; Simons' son, Richard, who is conductor of the Mid-Hudson Community Orchestra and Cortlandt Chamber Orchestra, on bass; and Simons' grandson Phil Simons on keyboard.

Simons credits his wife Dagmar for motivating him to play every day.

"She has supported me all the way," he said. "I likely would not have made it this far without her."

The daily performance gave Simons a certain focus during the pandemic.

"I always knew where I would be and what I was going to be doing at 6 o'clock."

Simons is not without a sense of humor. Between songs he'd joke around with quips such as "I'm almost 82 and I'm still squeezing. So ladies beware."

Members of the American Legion came to listen and there was a surprise visit by the Cortlandt Ambulance, whose members flashed lights and sounded their siren to thank Simons for his 500 days of music. When Simons was finished playing, he ceremoniously removed his sign.

"This has always been a tribute to caregivers and first responders," Simons said. "God bless them all."