

Volunteer Hospital Musician

Overview: I volunteer as a classical guitarist in the surgery waiting room, playing for family and friends of patients.

Since retirement in 2013, I've continued working on boards for several education-related nonprofits in the Twin Cities, including the YMCA and the University of Minnesota Retirees Association. But my most engaging community work has been performing weekly as music volunteer at St. Paul's Regions Hospital.

One of my goals for retirement was to learn to read music and play classical guitar, moving from the traditional folk/blue-grass genres of my youth. (As an undergraduate I played with Dana Waterman and many others in "jug bands" that entertained at cocktail parties and other pretty crazy events on campus). Consequently, I traded in my steel string Martin (which I hadn't played much in the previous 20 years) for a classical guitar. After a year or so focused on reading and playing classical music (popping in for occasional lessons via the internet), I began providing "background" for a few my friends' special events (including a wedding for one of my former students), and, eventually, I got the nerve up to audition for the music therapy volunteer program at Regions.

Although I live in downtown Minneapolis very near the Hennepin County Medical Center, I opted for Regions as a means of "payback" for the supportive experiences Peggy and I had with our two disabled children who spent many difficult months at Regions. Live music coming from the atrium always helped lessen the worry and frustration associated with those long hospital stays. Of course, during those times I had no idea I would end up playing there myself; I just knew that the music made a difference.

The audition went fine—after all, it's hard to reject a volunteer. During my first couple years with Regions, I rotated with other musicians playing in the hospital atrium. My "playlist" consists of pieces I would have liked to have heard—gentle, melodic, accessible—during the anxious days when our kids were ill. About two years ago, however, the music therapy coordinator suggested she would like to experiment with my playing in a more intimate setting—the surgery department family waiting area.

The waiting area is pretty spacious and typically has about 25-30 folks in various states of anxiety and anticipation awaiting their loved ones' surgical outcomes. The tension in the room is obvious, and during my first days playing there, I had some difficulty feeling "out of place" and that my music may be intruding on their privacy. However, the "thank you" offered by visitors as I packed up to leave always were reassuring. Soon the staff began receiving more formal feedback suggesting that the families really appreciated the calming influence of the music. Peggy (always the objective observer) usually accompanies me to these sessions and says within about ten minutes of the music, the atmosphere in the room changes--nervous chatter lessens and voices lose some of their edginess. The coordinator has declared the experiment a success, and I play there pretty regularly now.

For me, as mediocre musician trying to get better, the environment is perfect: it's a new audience each time; people are not paying enough attention to pick up on my mistakes, but despite the circumstances that bring them to the waiting room, many appreciate the unusual opportunity to hear the gentle sounds of classical guitar.

I'm writing this during the Covid-19 pandemic when all volunteer activities in the hospital are suspended. I certainly miss the experience and look forward to returning as soon as possible.

- **Gerry Rinehart**
- g-rine@umn.edu