

## Jimmy Rhodes: The Music Man

The resident had on a sports coat and a fishing hat and didn't move in his wheelchair when Jimmy Rhodes, Life Care's director of music services, went into his room.

"The nurses tried to engage him, but he was never responsive," remembered Rhodes. "So I played a song for him, and he lit up. I asked him if he wanted to play. He insisted that he didn't know how, but finally agreed."

Rhodes laid the small portable keyboard across the resident's wheelchair and programmed it to play automatically at the touch of a finger. The resident put his hands to the keys and was suddenly caught up in the excitement of pretending to play. One by one, nurses came in to take pictures of this out-of-character behavior of "Uncle Henry."

Rhodes took the keyboard and went on down the hall to perform for some other residents. On his way back to the lobby, he met Uncle Henry in the hall, and now he wanted to "play" again. By this time, a large group of associates had gathered around with cameras to witness the mini-concert.

Once again, Rhodes placed the keyboard on the arms of the wheelchair, and Uncle Henry took off. "He was just going wild, and grinning from ear to ear to resounding applause," Rhodes related. Halfway through the song, he looked up to Rhodes and in a soft voice said, "You know what? I know I'm not playin' this thing, but I'm gonna do it for them!" and he looked at the audience. Just toward the end of the music, he declared, "Maybe we ought to take up an offering!"



That story was one of Rhodes' favorites of the countless stories of Alzheimer's patients, stroke victims and other residents who were transformed by musical activities, sing-alongs or just by absorbing the rhythm and notes of this talented musician. In addition to preparing books, CDs and DVDs for facilities to use in music therapy programs, Rhodes personally visited our buildings across the country to do concerts for residents. It was his passion.

Raised on a farm in Tennessee, Rhodes picked cotton along with his parents. "The only thing I was noted for growing up was picking the most cotton in the county when I was 7," he laughed.

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He fought being called a musician, “but my mother instilled it in me,” he said. Her desire that he learn to play the piano caused her to buy a correspondence course and teach herself hymns before teaching him. He never forgot what his mother, Truma Rhodes, did for him. In a letter to her in 2008, he wrote:

*Where would I be if it hadn't been for all of your prayers and tender, unconditional love for me: always so patient, kind and loving? You always wanted the best for me. Your faith in me has always given me the desire to love God and serve others. I promise to you that I will continue to do this the rest of my days.*

When his family moved to Collegedale, Tennessee, he began taking lessons from a friend, Lourene Sykes (now Preston), for 50 cents a lesson. Rhodes graduated from Southern Adventist University with a B.S. degree in music education and moved to California, where he taught music at a private academy while working on a master's degree at the University of Southern California.



He wrote his thesis on how music affects people's behavior, and this research gave him a basis of understanding music therapy. “I witnessed the effect of music therapy on disabled children, read about how the brain is affected by music, and volunteered to play worship services at nursing homes,” he recalled. “Even now, I try to find out what each resident responds to – what stimulates the brain and causes them to reminisce.”

Rhodes moved back to Tennessee in 1970 and performed at the grand opening of the first facility in what was to become Life Care. He helped run the company for a year before moving back to California, where he performed with the Lawrence Welk Orchestra, Faith for Today and many other artists. He joined Life Care full-time in 1994.

Whenever we held an open house for a new building or did an orientation program for associates in a facility we acquired or any other kind of special event, I always wanted Jimmy there to begin the festivities. He could light up an audience and put them in a happy place better than anyone or anything.

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He acknowledged the gifts God placed within him. “I’ve been called a one-man band,” Rhodes said, when asked how many instruments he could play. He pointed to a black-and-white picture of himself as a young man playing five or six instruments.

The piano, the organ and the horns are silent now. The music man is gone. He passed away on Tuesday, Feb. 5.

But the sounds he created and shared, and the joy, the laughter and the inspiration that resulted, will linger in the hearts of the thousands upon thousands of people who eagerly embraced the gifts he gave them.

*Addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart (Ephesians 5:19 ESV).*



– Beecher Hunter