

Villager Uses Banjo Ukulele To Bring Back Memories

Rhoades has been strumming in nursing homes and assisted living facilities, for the past 20 years.

By MICHAEL FORTUNA
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Marc Rhoades used to sit in his home office in the Atlanta area, singing and playing his banjo ukulele for his dogs.

"After finishing belting out a song, I'd think, 'Man, that sounded good to me,'" he said. "It'd be so much fun to do that in front of an audience."

Since moving to The Villages, that wish has come to life, thanks to performing in such groups as Sparkey's Strummers and the Banjolele Strings Club.

"It's just fun to see people enjoying the music that I love," said Rhoades, of the Village Del Mar.

In addition to playing in groups, Rhoades has a solo act called MrBluSkies. For the past 20 years, he has been taking his trusty ukulele and performing songs from the early to mid-20th century for audiences in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and resident clubs and organizations.

"When you go to memory care places, you see people come in, and they're physically there, but they're not there. I start playing, and you see them start smiling. They know the words to the song. They start mouthing the words. It's a lot of fun."

A lot of those songs were favorites of his father, and the two enjoyed performing them together.

"It's a way I relate and feel close to him," Rhoades said. "I can see him smile when we find a new chord."

In the midst of staying at home the past few weeks, Rhoades has gone out to his lanai to play some tunes on



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As MrBluSkies, Marc Rhoades has been playing at local assisted living facilities for a couple of years. He also runs the Banjolele Strings Music Club.

the ukulele. He also has gotten together with a few members of Sparkey's Strummers to play on someone's driveway.

He started playing the ukulele when he was 14. While attending a band camp in Cincinnati, Rhoades noticed a guy playing the ukulele by the campfire.

"All the girls really liked it," Rhoades said. "I got home and said, 'I got to get a ukulele.'"

Rhoades went out to a local music store and bought the instrument. That evening, his father came home from work, and to the delight of Rhoades, started playing a couple of tunes.

"I said, 'How do you know (how to play)?" Rhoades said. "He said, 'When I was a kid, everybody played the ukulele.'"

His father taught him three chords at the beginning, then Rhoades would pick up new chords in songs along the way.

"It's a fairly easy instrument to play," Rhoades said. "You get some muscle memory in your hands with the chords."

Although, his father had mentioned a banjo ukulele, it wasn't until 1995 that Rhoades found the hybrid instrument

for sale.

"I had never been with someone else that had played the banjo ukulele," he said. "We coordinated our lifestyle visit so I could go to the Ukulele Club and the Banjolele Club. I thought, 'Are you kidding?'" There were like 35 people playing. I couldn't believe it."

Going from the ukulele to the banjo ukulele was a smooth transition for Rhoades.

"It's tuned the same, it's the same chords," Rhoades said. "It just looks like a little banjo."

Rhoades joined The Villages Ukulele Club after he moved to Florida, but he ended up stepping away. He also plays in the Ukulele Players Club, which performs a few gigs each year; the Hummers and Strummers; Sparkey's Strummers; and the Banjolele Strings Club, which he now leads.

For the past four years, Rhoades brought his act to the annual Music Lover's Showcase held at Savannah Center.

"(Playing) makes me feel better," Rhoades said. "I can be in a sour mood, pick up a ukulele, and within 10 to 15 minutes, I'm feeling good."