

The Extra Mile

PEOPLE OF YELLOW

Making Music Through Giving Songs

The Yellow Team | Jan. 23, 2023



How two Yellow employees collaborated on a song to help disabled children and their families in southeast Michigan.

Sometimes, a routine work assignment can turn into something bigger than work.

Last summer, Bryan Benchich, an area sales director for Yellow, shadowed Brent Johnson, manager of Jackson, Mich. terminal #358. He wanted to learn what Johnson does on a day-to-day basis as part of an effort to improve collaboration between Sales and Operations.

One day during a break, the two men started talking about music. Benchich mentioned he was a guitarist and singer-songwriter who played gigs around Grand Rapids, Mich. Johnson responded by handing Benchich his business card – the one for a nonprofit charity called Giving Songs – and asked if he would like to record a song in a studio.

"I said, 'Sure,'" Benchich recalled. "As a musician, it's always been a dream to be recorded and something I had never done."

They set a date in August for Benchich to record at Plymouth Rock Studio in Plymouth, Mich. The recording would be for more than just posterity. It would raise money through [Giving Songs](#), a charity that provides aid to southeast Michigan families that have disabled children who are wheelchair users.



Bryan Benchich, ready to record at Plymouth Rock Studio.

Helping Others Through Music

Johnson, who has managed the Jackson terminal for two years and worked seven years for Yellow, grew up in a family of musicians. One of his brothers even went on to open a recording studio. But Johnson never learned to play an instrument until after his son, Jack, was born in 2010.

Jack, who is now 12 years old, has several medical issues, including cerebral palsy, blindness and a seizure disorder, leaving him unable to see, speak or walk. Hoping to bond with his young child, Johnson picked up a six-string guitar and learned to play a few tunes. Jack responded to the music.

"It was clear from day one that he enjoyed that," Johnson said. "So that was a win."

That success led Johnson to consider other ways that music could help kids like Jack. Knowing first-hand the time and financial pressure placed on families with disabled children, Johnson worked with his brother to form Giving Songs, which records and sells songs that raise awareness and benefit families of disabled kids.

Over the past 11 years, Giving Songs has recorded 85 songs, raising more than \$300,000 and contributing 25 individual grants. The money goes toward funding specialized transportation, helping families to purchase or modify vehicles to make them wheelchair accessible. A minivan that is customized for wheelchair access can cost as much as \$50,000, Johnson said.

"The goal with our grants is to take out that cost of the conversion to wheelchair accessibility in order to normalize that purchase of the vehicle," he said. "We have become experts at that."

What started with Johnson making a handful of phone calls in 2012 is now a 501(c)(3) with an advisory board and a network of volunteers. The plan is to grow Giving Songs enough to expand its demographic footprint beyond serving families in the southeast corner of Michigan.

Though the challenges of raising a disabled child are considerable, Johnson considers his family to be fortunate. He and his wife, Jaime, have good careers and family members nearby who can help with Jack's care. Johnson knows not all families have that kind of support. Families who have children with multiple disabilities often rely on a single income and have few social programs to turn to for help. They can quickly become isolated.

"When you have a child like mine, no one gives you a phone number to a special needs child hotline," Johnson said. "Looking around, I saw that I had resources and friends and a network that, if we played our cards right, we could make a new resource for these families."



Jack Johnson gives his dad a hug.

A Bucket List Item

Benchich has worked 13 years for Yellow, recently taking on a new role as vice president of strategic accounts and operating out of Wyoming, Mich. terminal #272. His passion for singing and playing guitar began at age 16. He has performed acoustic sets in front of audiences in his hometown of Grand Rapids for several years.

For his first recording this summer at Plymouth Rock Studio, Benchich selected the Keith Urban song, "Making Memories of Us," which he and his wife, Carrie, chose as their wedding song. The song can be downloaded from the Giving Songs website, as well as other streaming services like Spotify and Amazon Music.

"This gave me a chance to professionally record our song, which was a gift to my wife, so to speak," Benchich said.

Another song he recorded in the same studio session, "Don't Look Back in Anger," by Oasis, will be released by Giving Songs at a future date.

Recording a song in a professional setting was a bucket list item for Benchich. But that took a back seat to the money the song will raise for families in need of financial help. During the session, Benchich wore his Yellow ballcap, since it was Yellow that brought him and Johnson together to record the song.

"The real story is Giving Songs. The awesome stuff that charity does is amazing," Benchich said. "I was happy to be a part of it. When Brent told me about what the charity does with music and considering my own background I thought, 'These two things intersect.'"

Operating a charity while also raising a young family wouldn't be possible without some flexibility and a supportive employer. Johnson said his Yellow colleagues have been extremely encouraging about his efforts with Giving Songs. He never expected that one of them would record two songs for him, but that's how it worked out.

"Having the opportunity to work with Bryan in the studio has just been awesome," he said.

For more information about Giving Song and to access its online library of music, visit [givingsongs.org](#).

