

Harmony Man



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“Like many Americans, I watched the victims of Hurricane Katrina and knew there must be something I could do to help New Orleans, a city that has given the world so much wonderful music. But it was easier said than done.”

By Gary Allegretto

Harmonikids.org

I worried about the traumatic effect the storm's aftermath was having on these kids, which they would carry into their lives in the aftermath. I am a professional blues musician and the director of Harmonikids, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that provides music therapy to special-needs children by giving them new harmonicas and music lessons in entertaining sessions. Earlier last year I had taken 1,000 harmonicas to traumatized children in orphanages and refugee camps of the tsunami in North Sumatra. I wanted to bring the same kind of unique relief to these American kids in Katrina's aftermath.

Both FEMA and the Red Cross seemed to be overwhelmed by this unprecedented disaster. Several weeks of daily contacts to the Red Cross produced no effective leads. Even the director of the Disaster Mental Health Services in Washington, D.C., though enthusiastic about Harmonikids, was unable to effectively connect me with a shelter. Frustrated but unwilling to give up, I persisted. Months later, assistance finally came as a result of an email I sent to Dennis Schaibly, the blues deejay for public radio station WWOZ in New Orleans.



HITTING ALL THE RIGHT NOTES: These children, displaced by damage to their New Orleans homes from Hurricane Katrina, were the beneficiaries of free harmonicas and a blues music lesson, thanks to the extra effort of Harmonikids and Gary Allegretto.



Dennis replied to my email, and connected me with Renaissance Village, a FEMA facility for evacuees administered by the Louisiana Recovery Corps. They accepted my application to provide aid through Harmonikids, and Hohner, Inc., generously donated the harmonicas.

Renaissance Village is a former cow pasture on the outskirts of Baker, Louisiana, where 573 trailers are spread across 62 acres. The modest trailers provide families' one bedroom, bunk beds off the kitchen, and a cramped bathroom. Residents receive three meals a day, free laundry facilities, and daily bus service to New Orleans.

As I arrived, I saw that the children were engaged in many activities: an arts and crafts program was in session, a disc jockey had set up a sound system and was loudly playing holiday music, and, of course with being the Christmas season, Santa Claus was about to make his appearance. I did not view any of it as "competition" with Harmonikids. I was happy to see the children receiving so much attention and gifts. I had brought them the unique gift of creating music, which they would be able to carry into their future long after the Katrina relief assistance stopped arriving. Moreover, I knew from experience that when children hear music on harmonicas, they cannot resist participating.

An accomplished local bluesman called Big Daddy O accompanied me with his guitar and sound system. We performed a lively blues set for the families who had gathered in the area, and before long, young children wandered by and began dancing to the music. I asked the kids if they knew this kind of music, and they had. "Yeah, that's the blues!" they shouted. Having caught their curiosity and attention, I passed out harmonicas and music sheets and began the Harmonikids session. They learned the familiar "Shave And a Haircut" jingle with lightning speed, moved on to the old favorite "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," and gained self-confidence as they realized they were making music for the first time. We finished the session with the Louisiana state song, "You Are My Sunshine."

Giving children harmonicas and music is often like planting a seed; it grows and blossoms in their lives, though you don't always see the end result. For the kids at Renaissance Village, who had bravely endured so much hardship in the aftermath of

Hurricane Katrina, the healing gift of music would, I hoped, sew the seeds of recovery for these young people. The blues is their ancestral legacy to us, and I felt privileged to be able to return the favor through this visit on behalf of Harmonikids.

Gary Allegretto is founder of the 501(c)3 tax-deductible charitable organization called www.Harmonikids.org. Donations may be made to Harmonikids, 2144 Beech Knoll Road, Los Angeles, CA 90046.

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