

Healing starts in the lobby at this hospital, where volunteer musicians play their passion

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If you happen to walk through the front doors of Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital in Barrington, near Chicago, and think you hear the Windows startup music, or the themes for Universal Studios or Warner Bros. being played on the piano, don't second guess it. Odds are it is

Guido Calcagno, registered nurse, warming up to play melodies for patients, staff and visitors.

Calcagno is one of the volunteer musicians who play live [music](#) for visitors in Good Shepherd's lobby Monday through Saturday.

When volunteer pianist Renee Mullaney is working the 88 keys in the lobby, she has a tendency to keep her eye on the entryway. If she spots a child coming into the hospital, she may play a Disney song or "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star." If a veteran walks in, she will play a patriotic song. Her reasoning: Hospitals can be scary and intimidating, and if the people recognize a familiar ditty in the air, maybe that one little thing will put them at ease.

"Since we're in the front area there, I feel like the pianists are kind of ambassadors for setting a positive tone for Advocate Good Shepherd and sometimes we can be the face of the hospital," said Mullaney, a Cary resident who has been volunteering her musical talent for four years. "Let's face it, when you're at the hospital, the joyful thing is babies. Otherwise you're there to visit somebody that's sick or you're there for a test. ... Every time I go and play, at least three or four people will walk by and you can see them snapping their fingers to the music. People stop and thank us for our efforts—for being there and bringing a little bit of comfort to what can otherwise be a stressful situation."

Calcagno, 23, understands. He plays the baby grand Kawai on his days off. Trained on piano since he was 4, the Deerfield resident started working at Good Shepherd in August 2021 and by October, he was regaling passersby with [popular music](#) and compositions that he penned. And it all started when he overheard volunteer pianist Sue Schuerr play during a trip to the cafeteria. He introduced himself, played some music for Schuerr and she directed him to the hospital's volunteer services coordinator, Lynette Eeg, a clarinetist who auditions the music

volunteers. The rest is history.

"I could get through maybe eight different songs when I'm playing," Calcagno said. "I play from a wide selection of music. I have my own compositions ... about 10 different pieces that I can play from memory or improv. I like to think that music I've created really does invoke emotions or feelings. In my piano binder, I have music from TV shows—whether it's Korean dramas, animé, intros from 'The Golden Girls,' songs from movies like 'Interstellar,' 'Inception,' and more modern classical music, pop songs. It also depends on how I'm feeling that day. Music is just as therapeutic as it is for my listeners. It helps me relax, contemplate and reflect on what could have happened the day before at work, helps me process."

Calcagno, who balances a variety of patients during his 12-hour workdays, says he always has time for music, and one day he'd love to help on a film score.

Eeg said there are currently 10 volunteer musicians, including a flutist, who play 90-minute shifts. High schoolers, as long as they are at least 16, can volunteer as well. Interested parties can fill out an application. Magda Scanlan, Good Shepherd's volunteer services director, said the office makes sure volunteers' roles are aligned with their needs and passions.

Schuerr brought book club friend Mullaney into the fold, and she eventually brought her mom, a piano teacher, to play duets with her in the lobby. Schuerr, a retired English and drama teacher, laughs when remembering how she came to play at Good Shepherd in 2016.

"My husband had [knee surgery](#) and I got a little bored so I started walking around, checking out the hospital and going toward the lunch area, I went 'Whoa! A piano! This is terrific!'" she said. She sat down

and began to play. Schuerr asked staff if she could volunteer, and Eeg said a position was created.

"We created the position because now we had this beautiful piano that people wanted to play," Eeg said. She and Schuerr agreed that none of it would have happened had the donated piano been small enough to fit through a conference room's door as planned. When it couldn't fit, the piano found a permanent home at the hospital's front entrance.

"It was a wonderful mistake," Schuerr said. "It's been a blessing."

She plays late mornings/early afternoons on Thursdays. She said playing the piano at Good Shepherd has been good for her brain because she tries to learn two new pieces a week. Requests from patients have led her to learn how to play Coldplay and the Ukrainian anthem. She plays hymns, songs of the season. She even made friends along the way.

"I play Hanukkah and Christmas music. ... I try to keep inclusion in mind," Schuerr said. "You look around and see who's there and try to play for those people. I listen to Pandora. I listen to the radio and if I like a song, download it and play that. I don't want to be bored with my own music. I definitely try to jazz it up and make it fun for people."

Scanlan said the [live music](#) "feels like you're entering a truly healing space."

"It's a beautiful campus, but when you are hearing music, it just appeals to your other senses," she said.

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