

the joy of music

*New Mexico
Special
Orchestra
allows the
disabled
to express
themselves
with instruments
or in song*



SHOWMAN:
Bryan
Castleberry
of Belen plays
his guitar and
sings "Wildfire"
during Special
Orchestra
concerts.
Castleberry
plays with the
help of a special
prompter.

Story by TRACY DINGMANN

Photographs by
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Of the Journal

Bryan Castleberry can't see or walk or talk like most people, but he can be the lead singer in a rock 'n' roll band, thanks to a program called New Mexico Special Orchestra.

Castleberry's favorite song is the story-song "Wildfire," by Michael Martin Murphey, which he belts out every chance he gets.

And he gets lots of chances. Castleberry, 26, is one of about 20 developmentally disabled Valencia County people who have taken part in Special Orchestra, which allows them to sing and play musical instruments with the help of a special prompting device.

The Special Orchestra has performed at the Special Olympics in Albuquerque, at an awards show in Albuquerque and at its own concert in Valencia County, along with regular monthly events appearances.

Their favorite tunes range from Elvis classics to crowd-pleasing sing-a-longs like "You Are My Sunshine."

Learning to play an instrument, rehearsing together and performing on stage is an empowering experience for people with disabilities and one that brings them great happiness, said Special Orchestra founder Gair Linhart of La Joya.

"I'm doing it because of the joy that these people show when participating in music," he said. "Sometimes people with disabilities can't speak or understand verbal language, but music is a form of expression they can comprehend. For them to create music gives them the voice they never had."

Linhart, a former music educator at the Los Lunas Training School for developmentally disabled people, started Special Orchestra three years ago after the training school closed. The New Mexico Department of Health established the Los Lunas Community Program at the school, and Special Orchestra grew from there with help from the private Adelante Development center, said Linhart.



ORCHESTRA FOUNDER: Special Orchestra founder Gair Linhart uses natural grace and musical ability to lead his disabled students. A longtime educator, Linhart invented a device that makes it easy for them to play musical instruments.

To help people of all abilities play instruments, Linhart and his father devised the Special Music Prompter, which uses a string of lights to tell musicians when to play and what chord to use. The device is patented.

Though no students of any age or ability are turned away from Special Orchestra, the prompter device works best with people who can understand cause and effect, Linhart said.

In Special Orchestra, all instruments are tuned to an open chord of "C" so musicians who can't change chords can still play along "without it sounding like a complete racket," said Linhart. The instruments that work best are guitar, xylophone and anything with a keyboard.

See **ORCHESTRA** on **PAGE F2**



**SINGING IT
OUT:** Sarah
Payne of Belen
sings "You Are
My Sunshine"
during a recent
concert by Special
Orchestra at
Anna Becker
Park in Belen.
The free program
meets in Belen
and Albuquerque
and is open to
people of all ages
and abilities.

Orchestra expresses music's joy

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he said.

With his students, Linhart is attentive, gentle and funny.

"You're going to play that properly now," he chides a student, while removing a tamborine from around her neck.

Sometimes, flashes of his past life as a member of a rock band show up in his guitar flourishes. He also plays a mean blues harmonica. But mostly, he is careful to provide a solid rhythm for his students to rest upon.

Dr. Mohammed Zabih hired Linhart to work at the training school and remains one of his biggest supporters.

"His talent and his technique and his willingness to use this therapeutic approach to working with people is excellent," said Zabih, who now works at Lovelace. "He gets great support from the mental health community, but he needs to get more from music professionals."

Linhart offers his Special Music Prompter for sale for about \$90 on his Web site, www.specialorchestra.org. It comes with a free songbook and explanation of his method.

His mission: For people all over the world to learn the method and start Special Orchestras in their towns.

"I just want to spread these simple concepts," he said. "I feel like people with disabilities all over the country and the world should have the same opportunity."

In addition to the Valencia County group, which meets twice a month in Belen, Linhart recently added a Special Orchestra chapter in Albuquerque. That group meets monthly at an Adelante facility.

Special Orchestra is a nonprofit organization that depends on tax-deductible donations of money and instruments to survive.

Participants are not charged any fee, and musical instruments are provided to them for free (although they can bring their own). Guardians must accompany participants to all Special Orchestra sessions.

Special Orchestra can be reached at 864-3749.