



## New Mexico Special Orchestra celebrates 25 years of high notes

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Photos: Gabriela Campos/The New Mexican

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Rachel Martinez plays the violin while her mother, Blanch Martinez, beams and Trina Brillhart watches, moments before the New Mexico Special Orchestra begins to rehearse on Friday in Albuquerque.

*Ahead of the preparations for the group's 25th anniversary concert May 3 in Belen, founder Gair Linhart said the orchestra offers a chance for those with developmental disabilities to "share something the world needs: music."*

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ALBUQUERQUE — Roading it out to New Mexico 50 years ago in an effort to escape a likely career as a literature professor with patches on the elbows of his jacket, Gair Linhart knew he wanted to do something special. He's doing it now as founder of the New Mexico Special Orchestra, an ensemble of musicians of all ability levels who make

beautiful harmony together. As he prepped for a Friday afternoon rehearsal at the Rosario Bilingual Multicultural Services center, he noted many of the band members are accustomed to having things done for them on a regular basis, “from getting dressed to just about everything. This gives our musicians the chance to do something for others.”



Talented Kevin sings into the microphone with the New Mexico Special Orchestra during Friday’s rehearsal. Voices join a variety of traditional orchestra instruments in the group, plus tambourines, maracas and a xylophone.



Jennifer Madden plays the tambourine during Friday's rehearsal in Albuquerque.

"It's a community of fun," her father, Rick Madden, said. "She lights us all up when she lights up."

When they perform for audiences at venues ranging from the State Capitol, the New Mexico State Fair, and nursing homes “they are able to give something,” he said. “Most go most of their lives without being able to share anything with others,” he continued. “But here they share something the world needs: music.” Preparing for its 25th anniversary concert on May 3 in Belen, the orchestra ran through an array of songs ranging from “When Irish Eyes Are Smiling” — St. Patrick’s Day was fast approaching — to “Moonshadow” to “Bring It On Home To Me” to a number of original compositions by Linhart and the group. An audience of family members, caregivers, friends and passersby popped by to listen to the show, and Linhart said the musicians see little difference between a rehearsal and a concert. Linhart’s corny jokes — “The wind was so strong today, that it blew my dog away. You know what I said? Dog-gone!” — seemed to amuse both the audience and the musicians.

Linhart, who has worked as a musician / band leader for much of his life, founded the NM Special Orchestra (and non-profit Special Orchestra, Inc.) in 1999 after working for eight years at the now-gone Los Lunas Hospital and Training School. Having developed a penchant for playing the guitar and harmonica after being trained on the trombone as a youth, Linhart “realized that many of the folks with special needs could play too.” So he started the orchestra. Landing on the idea of using same-tuned instruments in the key of C – open tuning, he calls it – he realized it would allow everyone in the band to strum and bow and “blend in” regardless of their initial ability. As a result, “we can blend together and make mellifluous music and not have it just be a racket.”

Add some tambourines, maracas, a xylophone, and a gifted singer named Kevin and voila! – there’s something very harmonious about the orchestra.

Special Orchestra, now a major part of Gair Linhart’s life work, provides a vehicle for people who may not be able to express themselves freely, some of the parents and guardians said in interviews. Watching her 32 year old son, Woody Lowe playing his ukulele, Aletta McCoy said the orchestra is the perfect outlet for someone who has been “singing and performing since he was 3 or 4 years old. Gair usually lets each member pick a song that they want to play.”

Rick Madden, a retired doctor, father of 44-year-old Jennifer who plays and dances, said that she was born early leaving her with cerebral palsy. “She looks forward to playing with the orchestra,” he said. “She lights us all up when she lights up. The program brings happiness to me because she is so happy.”





**When Linhart fell into the field of Developmental Disabilities in 1989, he was just “needing a job”.**

Looking back at his career to date, Gair Linhart, who turns 71 this April, said he’d never figured he’d become the head of such a program, but that he’d not trade the experience “for a million bucks”.

If You Go:

**What:** *The New Mexico Special Orchestra 25th anniversary concert.*

**Where:** *Valencia Sheriff Posse Hall, 10 Interstate 25 bypass in Belen.*

**When:** *6:30 p.m. May 3. More info:* Visit [www.SpecialOrchestra.org](http://www.SpecialOrchestra.org) or call 505-864-3749.