

**Joe was forgotten for 46 years, until a letter suddenly arrived: Joe Oombash was put in a mental hospital in 1959, although his only handicap was blindness. His family in a remote Cree community now wants to see him, but money stands in the way.**

Saturday, December 3, 2005  
Page: E3  
Section: City  
Byline: Ron Corbett  
Column: Life in the City

Joe Oombash sits before an old battered piano, in the basement of a group home in Ottawa, rolls his head, claps his hands, then asks what I want to hear.

Before I can answer, he starts to play. He's chosen Jingle Bells, played with extra bass chords, so his left hand seems to be stroking the piano, so quickly does it move up and down the keyboard.

After that comes the old standard Buttons and Bows. Then a song from an obscure back-up singer who once played with Don Messer's Jubilee band. That was once his favourite show, he says. He listened to it in the mental hospital every week.

"I always liked the way she sang," he says, his head rolling in small semi-circles. "She had a beautiful voice."

If you ask him, Joe Oombash will tell you he has always played music, from the time he was a kid playing a mouth organ on the front porch of his parent's cabin, in Cold Lake, Ont., to the songs he sang while at the Rideau Regional Centre, the mental hospital he was sent to at the age of 13.

That was 46 years ago.

Mr. Oombash has been thinking about that recently, the family, and the home, he left in 1959, ending up in Ottawa simply because that's where he was sent when he was discharged from Rideau Regional, no other reason than that, a bureaucratic decision that determined the direction of his life, like every other bureaucratic decision before it.

Strange how home can sometimes be where you end up.

He has not seen any of his family since leaving Cold Lake, not even heard from them until recently, when a letter came, and that's what got him thinking about home; and got other people thinking about what a strange journey people make sometimes in life.

Mr. Oombash's fingers start to move quietly over the keyboard. He's playing another Christmas song.

IMAGES



Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen

No one can explain how Joe Oombash became so good with musical instruments while at the Rideau Regional Centre in Smiths Falls, but he can play just about anything, including the accordion.



Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen

Joe Oombash, shown above with Citizen Advocacy volunteer Jean Boulay, spoke to his sister in Cold Lake, Ont., by phone. Mr. Boulay's organization would love to send Mr. Oombash home to the remote community for Christmas, or bring some members of his family here. But travel is very expensive and there is almost no money for such a trip.



Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen

- - -

Joe Oombash was born blind. The year was 1946, and he was born on the Cold Lake Indian Reserve, 175 kilometres north of Sioux Lookout, in Northern Ontario.

There is no record of Joe Oombash having any disability at birth besides blindness, but that was enough to get him sent, at 13, to the Rideau Regional Treatment Centre, one of the largest mental hospitals in the province.

"Rideau Regional even had a blind wing back then," says Mary Shay, a social worker with Therapeutic and Educational Living Centres, a social agency that runs group homes for the visually impaired.

"A lot of people ended up there simply because they were blind. They had no other problems."

Joe Oombash came from a large Cree family that was having trouble supporting him, and that probably had as much to do with his being sent south as anything else.

Perhaps they could even cure the boy's eyes down there. Or take care of him until he could return home.

He would spend 29 years in Rideau Regional. When he left, he would have various learning disabilities and other health problems.

It was a similar story for many other patients, who arrived at the doors of the institution with no other ailments than visual impairment and poor social skills.

"Didn't like it," is how Mr. Oombash describes his time at the hospital, and then gives a loud shout, "Back to bed, Oooooombash," to mimic one of the night orderlies who worked the blind wing for years.

He had little to do in the hospital, and spent most of his days in front of a television that played Don Messer and Tommy Hunter on certain nights. In nearly 30 years, he never had a visitor other than someone who worked for the government.

Then, in 1988, as part of a provincewide initiative to move people from mental institutions back into the community (a trend that continues, with the final closure of Rideau Regional being scheduled for next year, although family members of some long-time patients are fighting it in court) Joe Oombash was finally discharged from the hospital.

He moved to this group home in Ottawa, on a short residential street off Merivale Road, where he lives today with five other visually impaired adults, many of whom also came from large institutions, warehoused there for years because there was no place else for them to go.

And it was here that social workers discovered something amazing had happened in the blind wing of the Rideau Regional Centre, some remarkable transformation, some alchemy that created something beautiful and inspiring, from a place where you would expect neither.

Joe Oombash, you see, arrived in Ottawa an accomplished musician.

- - -

"We're guessing he must have had some lessons at Rideau Regional, although there is no record of that," says Ms. Shay.

"Then again, maybe he's completely self-taught. He plays by ear today, and maybe that's how he's always played. They must have had a piano somewhere, that's what we're guessing."

Such a small detail that would be, in an institution the size of Rideau Regional, to have an upright piano somewhere in a common room, or in a back hallway, such a small detail in the grand scheme of things, amidst the doctors and the drugs, the government health officials and the latest funding formula, and yet that was what changed a man's life. It's humbling.

Today, there is no way of knowing how many songs Joe Oombash has committed to memory. He went for a music lesson once, curious to see what they were like, and the instructor said after 30 minutes that "Joe probably knows more songs than I do."

(Once a week, he goes to CD Warehouse, to ask the sales clerks for songs they have never heard of before. It is one of the highlights of his week, and it's amusing to imagine young nose-ringed clerks scouring the store for old Don Messer records.)

Once in Ottawa, this musical gift was allowed to flourish. He was given an accordion as a present. An upright piano and a synthesizer were moved into the basement of the group home.

Over the years, people have brought virtually every brass and wind instrument known to man to the home, and Joe has played every one within a few hours, from saxophone to trombone, clarinet to mouth organ.

He has gone on to be a licenced busker in the Byward Market, and sings in the choir of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind.

Once a week, he plays accordion at the Starwood nursing home, a "regular gig" that earned him an award three years ago, as one of Nepean's most dedicated volunteers. This is a man, keep in mind, who spent nearly 30 years in a mental hospital. What he might have done with a different start, with a few different breaks in the early years, has intrigued everyone who has ever met Joe Oombash.

And helps to explain why there was such excitement at the group home recently, when a letter arrived from Cold Lake, Ont.

- - -

The letter was originally mailed to the Odawa Native Friendship centre, addressed "To Whom it May Concern." It came from a niece of Joe Oombash.

Turns out his family had been trying to reach him, had not forgotten the young boy who left the reserve 46 years ago.

A sister was spearheading the hunt, although the letter was signed by more than eight family member; nieces and nephews, two brothers.

The names were read to Mr. Oombash in hushed tones, as he slowly came to realize he had a large family left up North.

"It's been quite something for Joe, getting that letter," says Jean Boulay, a volunteer with Citizen Advocacy of Ottawa, a group that pairs disabled people with volunteer advocates.

"To know there is a family out there that is trying to reach him, that wants to see him, it has meant everything to him."

Once the letter arrived, TELC and Citizen Advocacy began looking at ways of getting Mr. Oombash back to Cold Lake for Christmas, or if that was impossible, than perhaps bringing some of his family to Ottawa. It seems unlikely they have the money to do either.

Which is a pity.

There would be few Christmas stories more inspiring than one that had Joe Oombash reunited with his family, after the long, strange journey he has taken since being separated from them; and after everything he has done for this city, his adopted home, even if the greatest thing he has done is show us how to find joy in even the sparest of lives.

If nothing else, Mr. Oombash got to talk to his sister this week. A long phone call, as you might imagine.

He says he even sang for her. A Christmas song. Recorded years ago by Tommy Hunter. Perhaps again, there should be no surprise.

Illustration:

- Photo: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen / No one can explain how Joe Oombash became so good with musical instruments while at the Rideau Regional Centre in Smiths Falls, but he can play just about anything, including the accordion.
- Photo: Jean Levac, The Ottawa Citizen / Joe Oombash, shown at left with Citizen Advocacy volunteer Jean Boulay, spoke to his sister in Cold Lake, Ont., by phone. Mr. Boulay's organization would love to send Mr. Oombash home to the remote community for Christmas, or bring some members of his family here. But travel is very expensive and there is almost no money for such a trip.

---

From the latest foibles at City Hall to an elderly man reading Anne Bronte novels next to the worst crack house in the nation's capital, award-winning journalist Ron Corbett offers a unique vision of our city every Saturday in Life in the City. If you have a story idea for Ron, contact him at [rcorbett@thecitizen.canwest.com](mailto:rcorbett@thecitizen.canwest.com).

---