

Citizens wait for friends to become their advocates

ANDREW BERGLAND
NTW Staff

When the music begins to flow from Joseph Oombash's accordion he is overcome with a look of pure bliss. A smile threatens to connect each ear and the blind Nepean native begins to chuckle in delight over whatever polka or old-time tune he has decided to play.

While today he has chosen the accordion, any other day could yield any number of different instruments including the piano or the harmonica, which he uses in conjunction with the accordion.

When not at his City View group home, Oombash can be found playing for the seniors at Starwood or singing for the Canadian National Institute for the Blind Choir.

What Oombash gives to the community through his gift for music is great, but what he requests in return is small. All he asks for in return is a good friend.

Like 15 other Nepean residents living with disabilities, Oombash sits on the Citizen Advocacy of Ottawa's waiting



Joseph Oombash of Citizen Advocacy doesn't let his disability blind him from creating a stomping' good tune.

list, hoping to find someone who will take a few hours out of his or her week to spend some time with him.

More specifically Oombash would like someone to go out with him for an occasional plate of bacon and eggs. He would also like someone to accompany him to the annual Odawa Pow Wow so he can learn more about his First Nation's heritage.

Citizen Advocacy of Ottawa

has been creating matches between disabled people like Oombash and non-disabled people for more than 30 years. The purpose of the organization is to help these members of society participate within the community.

"What we do is reduce the isolation that many people with disabilities experience," said Heather Badenoch, Community Relations & Resource Development Officer.

Badenoch said many people get paid to be in a part of the lives of her clients, but they need people who want to be in their lives.

After initial matches are made the relationship between advocate and protégé is like any other friendship.

Schedules are left to the matches to work out as well as the activities they chose to partake in. It could be shopping, going to a show, out for a bite or just having a conversation together.

Badenoch said protégés often look to the advocates for advice.

Advocacy, see page 5

Males wait up to four years to find a friend

Advocacy, from one

Subjects could include their finances, other relationships, or any number of situations they may be unsure of how to handle.

Little is asked of volunteers who wish to become an advocate, other than a year-long commitment. Badenoch said most people pass the commitment mark without even knowing it.

Phillip Hogarth has been David Froom's advocate for about four years now and Hogarth says he can't think of the relationship in term of anything but a friendship.

Froom suffers from sensory and intellectual disabilities but the abilities he does possess are incredible. He is one of those rare individuals who has memory recall beyond what most able bodies people can comprehend.

In a steady monotone voice,

Froom can recite the full name, date of birth, even the exact day most of the people who have ever entered his life, were born.

He can recall sections of conversation that took place more than 50 years ago, as well as the circumstances in which the conversations took place.

He remembers being placed in an institution at a young age by mistake, as was a common occurrence at that time from those with his disabilities, he said.

He even remembers circumstances that took place in the first few years of his life.

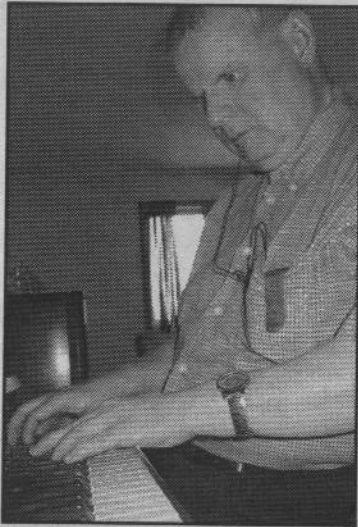
"I was born with the gift of music in 1944," he recalls. "I would sing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star from my crib."

Despite being partially deaf, Froom has an affinity for music, much like Oombash.

"My father bought a piano and at 4, within 1 hour I played my

first song, Kentucky Babe, in two part harmony," he said.

Froom says he has written a total of 133 compositions in his lifetime and he can recall the first



David Froom on piano.

of those songs. He calls it In the Sky and began to recite the surprisingly visually inspired lyrics.

Hogarth is also a musician himself and this is one of the reasons they were paired together in 2001.

Hogarth gave Froom one of his recordings soon after they met, and fortunately, by that time, a kinship had developed between them.

"It drove me crazy," said Froom with a rare amount of passion in his voice. "In the 60s my brother told me rock and roll was here to stay but I am still unconvinced."

Hogarth said his decision to become part of the Citizens Advocacy program came from a wish to give back to the community through volunteer. As it turned out, he was the one on the receiving end, learning some important lessons from Froom.

"David has such a beautiful outlook on life – when something is bugging me I just think about all the struggles David has to go through," said Hogarth.

Froom added his time spend with is actually the easiest thing he does in the week and the requirements for a protégé are very simple.

"As long as you have a pulse and preferably a car you can work it out. It's two TV shows out of your week," he said. "I am really surprised more people don't do it."

Currently the waiting list for female's looking for advocates is eight months long while the waiting list for the males is four years.

Those who wish to learn more about the Citizens Advocacy program can call 761-9522 or check out their website at www.citizenadvocacy.org.