

# *Blackwood Arts*

To our Blackwood friends,

April 1, 2020

"We are known by the choices we make."

You all know Shelly Oesterling, that vivacious person who drives in from Maryland to greet you and offer food or kind words—whatever you need to fill your heart with gladness. SHELLY IS ONE OF OUR VOLUNTEERS WHO ALWAYS HAS A SMILE ON HER FACE AND WORKS TIRELESSLY SO YOU HAVE A GOOD CONCERT EXPERIENCE,. . . not because she feels obligated but because she wants to—that is just who she is.

Last week, when I opened my Facebook, there was a picture of Shelly with her dad, and a message that read :

"My dad falls into multiple High Risk categories. COVID-19. If you know my dad, you know he would do anything for you or for anyone. The least you can do for him is distance. . . He would do it for you. Stay Home."

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This past February, I spent time in Florida with my two sisters, finalizing performer contracts and writing the Newsletter. That work is now obsolete, for everything - including non-Blackwood Arts charity events - has been cancelled. We are not one of the essential industries, our place of assembly does not have enough room to keep hands from touching hands-, we believe in distancing—and we are now faced with what to do to salvage our mission choices for the year. . . what we are all about.

Dave Peckham, a newcomer to Blackwood, was to have performed for the Make-A-Wish concert. Over the past twenty nine years, our concerts helped raise over \$400,000, enough to fulfill the wishes of over 400 children from the Greater Butler Area—children with life-threatening illnesses. Stephanie Pugliese, the M-A-W representative who is with us each year, expressed concern that because so many events had to be cancelled this year, many, many wishes of the children will not be fulfilled. She expressed the hope that some of the creative minds and hearts at Blackwood might find alternative ways to help.

Adam Swanson, the 27-year-old from Colorado, who delighted every one with his ragtime piano playing, was disappointed he is not able to

return to Blackwood again this year. The net proceeds from his concert were earmarked for the music programs at the elementary-school level.

Richard Hills from the United Kingdom was planning his encore . . . something even more exciting than his rendition of "Tiger Rag" which electrified the dinner audience two years ago. We had signed his working visa that would have enabled him to come to the United States . . . but more and more restrictions on both sides of the pond were being enforced and we chose to play it safe and cancel. Richard also had agreed to stay over another day to introduce the theater organ and a silent slapstick movie to the entire Fourth Grade of the Dassa McKinney Elementary School.

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This is the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our scholarship award program. The auditions and recital have been cancelled; but rather than refunding the \$50 application fee, it was decided to pool the entire 2020 announced scholarship total and award each applicant an equal share--\$2500. The article on the enclosed page from the Newsletter lists all of the applicants who received a scholarship this year. Brett Miller, a student of Jelani Eddington (a favorite at Blackwood) sent a letter of appreciation for his scholarship award and said he is looking forward to someday visiting Blackwood and playing its mighty theater organ.

To date, our Blackwood organization has awarded \$358,500 to 108 High School seniors pursuing a career in music performance.

A few other events that will be missed. The silent movie was different in scope from those in the past. It was a deep melodrama entitled "Sunrise; a Song of Two Humans" starring George O'Brien, Margaret Livingston, and Janet Gaynor. The story is simple, but powerful, with the woman from the city persuading the man to drown his wife so they can run away together. Clark Wilson, considered one of the finest interpreters of silent films, was chosen to accompany this film, which won an Academy Award for Cinematography, for Best Unique and Artistic Quality of Production, and Best Actress for Janet Gaynor.

The Newsletter also includes kudos and condolences to families of our friends who have passed on -- and a sincere THANK YOU to our volunteers and local merchants who supported our programs last year. .

We at Blackwood offer all we have created to helping others, even though some events are not by way of our official non-profit mission.

We've had to postpone several tours, whose proceeds flow back to young children; a silent movie to benefit the Slippery Rock Community Library; . . . and a private benefit recital by Devin Moore, a young violist studying at Julliard. Devin was raised in a single-parent home. His mother works several jobs to support her three children, and Devin spends many hours working to supplement his tuition scholarship. The Julliard School has urged Devin to stop his multiple outside employment so that he has more time to develop his outstanding musical genius. This benefit concert would have raised funds for Devin's living and music-related expenses.

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I'm beginning to feel like this is a fireside chat -- that we should be sitting in the springhouse under the heater, as Don and I do at the end of each day—mulling over what happened and how it will affect our desire to bring peace and well-being . . . and music to all who pass this way.

We've made the best choices we can with the restrictions and data at hand, and we now are exploring new ways to financially help the children and others who have been affected by this whole dilemma.

Yesterday, I spotted in my bedroom, a large jug into which I've been tossing loose coins for many years. I began wrapping them . . . and was surprised at how quickly the nickels and dimes that I have tossed aside can add into hundreds of dollars. Finished today -- and now have \$638 in rolled coins on the dining room table. My sister Betty has a wastebasket of coins waiting for me - and, perhaps, you have a piggy bank whose contents you would like to combine with ours . . . and maybe others would like to share what they have.

I'll always remember the little, critically ill girl who wished for a special type of puppy so she could "water it and make it grow." Using some of our donations that year, Make-A-Wish located a puppy and on the eve of Christmas delivered it to the little girl.. The next M-A-W bulletin showed a picture of her hugging the treasured gift. Each year the names of children who no longer are with us is published in the M-A-W brochure—first names only—and for many years I kept wondering if the little girl described above was one of them. It's a heart-grabbing thought, but it's a reality. WE MUST SUPPORT THESE SPECIAL CHILDREN THIS YEAR for who knows where they'll be NEXT YEAR.

We urge you to open your hearts to the causes supported by our programs. Maybe you have reasons to like one over another, but they are

*all worthy and should not be abandoned this year because of imposed social distancing. Think about the joy our concerts have generated. Perhaps you have other ideas, or special funds to contribute. Call me, Ben (724-735-2813) to talk about it.*

*These once-in-a-lifetime events that we are experiencing cause us to react in unforeseen ways. We all need help and reassurance. "We get to know people by the choices they make." I've enjoyed reading some of the messages that come across my computer screen. Some are sentimental, like our friend Shelly thanking people for staying home, some showing fear of what the future might bring because of lost employment, and some just reflecting sorrow of the times, like the one flashing Neil Diamond's Sweet Caroline "hands touching hands" as a no-no, for togetherness is no longer allowed.*

*Tomorrow a new day will be dawning. The sun will be shining and the wind gently blowing against our faces as we walk the pathways. The robins will be singing and nesting, and the hundreds of tulips and yellow daffodils blooming. Don and I will be painting or fixing something in need of repair - or weeding—forever weeding and cutting the many acres of grass. We will be living a memory of other years . . . and looking forward to being with you all again . . . soon!*

*Warmest regards,*

*Ben Robertson*

*We would greatly appreciate any contribution you can make to the events that were scheduled at Blackwood this year. CONTACT INFORMATION --:*

*Make-A-Wish; Donations should be directed to Stephanie Pugliese, Make-A-Wish, 707 Grant Street, Floor 37, Pittsburgh, PA 15219 (412-471-9474)*

*Please write (Blackwood) in the "memo" line on the check*

*Music Programs - Scholarships, musical instruments, and tutoring; Blackwood Arts, 118 Blackwood Lane, Harrisville, PA 16038 (724-735-2813)*

*Slippery Rock Community Library; Karen Piece, Slippery Rock Community Library, PO Box 25, Slippery Rock, PA 16057 (724-738-9179)*

*Devin Moore; Donations should be made out to Devin Moore, and sent to Devin Moore c/o Blackwood, 118 Blackwood Lane, Harrisville, PA 16038 (724-735-2813)*