



Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Singer and entertainer Paula Ann DeMonico leading the Apple Barrel Bunch in Christmas carols at Apple Rehab in Guilford

Friendly Visiting program inspires silent woman to sing

By Lisa Reisman

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GUILFORD — At a recent rehearsal of the Apple Barrel Bunch, a singing group at Apple Rehab, choir leader Paula Ann DeMonico heard a voice rising above all the others. It was a trained voice, one that she didn't recognize.

Until then, "this lady came every week and never sang, never even talked," said DeMonico at the group's Christmas concert in the facility's dining room last week. "And then, suddenly, there she was, singing."

The reserve of the woman who, it turned out, had sung in her church choir for years, is not uncommon, according to Marta Slattery, director of Guilford Interfaith Volunteers, a nonprofit that seeks to "promote the well-being of the home-bound, elderly, or those of any age who have special needs," as its website reads.

"Loneliness has a huge impact on the health of an individual, and right now, there

is a loneliness epidemic, especially in older adults," Slattery said.

That can be true, it seems, even in a group setting like Apple Rehab. A study from the University of California at San Francisco found that "feeling lonely does not correlate to living alone."

Conversely, social activity can have a major impact on the way we function later in life, according to Louis Cozolino, professor of psychology at Pepperdine.

"Of all the experiences we need to survive and thrive, it is the experience of engaging with others that is most meaningful and important," he writes in "Timeless: Nature's Formula for Health and Longevity."

That's where the Friendly Visiting Program, led by Ann Marie Gunn, comes in, with its mission to provide at least one hour of caring, quality friendship each week to any Guilford resident feeling "out of touch" or lonely.

The program depends on volunteers like DeMonico, an animated singer and entertainer in the husband-wife duo Wingbeat who witnessed her father benefitting from Friendly Visiting and was inspired to "pay it forward," as she put it, with weekly one-hour rehearsals for the group.

"The point is to keep them coming," she said, as she produced her ukulele and led the group in a spirited rendition of "Holly Jolly Christmas," some members singing lustily, others shaking bells, and still more bobbing their heads to the music, quiet smiles on their faces.

"I tell them they can be a part of this even if they don't sing," she said later, adding, as she flashed an impish smile, "but then again, you never know when someone may surprise you."

For more information or to become involved in Guilford Interfaith Volunteers, visit <http://givct.org/volunteer-2/> or call 203-453-8359.

For more information about Wingbeat, visit wingbeatmusic.com, email paulaann@wingbeatmusic.com, or call 860-575-1687.

