

Volunteer gives seniors the gift of music

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NIAGARA FALLS – Jim Kershaw knows all the old standards: It's a Long Way to Tipperary, White Cliffs of Dover, Auld Lang Syne and the Green, Green Grass of Home.

It's music that stirs up the memories of seniors living in the nursing homes where he plays two or three times a week, and it's a pastime Kershaw said he finds rewarding because of the pleasure it brings.

"I know they appreciate it," Kershaw said.

"Sometimes there's a real exuberance and you hear people humming along and reminiscing."

Kershaw has been a staple in Niagara Falls nursing homes since 1997, when he returned from Toronto and decided to begin playing for seniors. It gave Kershaw the chance to return to his early musical roots, something that had taken a back seat in his life for 20 years while he

worked as a sign painter.

Most of the time, residents join in sing-songs, or leave the recreation area talking about the time in their lives when those songs were important.

But Tuesday, when Kershaw paid his regular visit to Oakwood Park Lodge, it was to an audience that couldn't respond.

Playing on the dementia ward isn't a popular gig with many of the volunteers who come to the nursing home to entertain, said administrator Paul Taylor. Many want to have some response from their audience – clapping, singing along or even nodding their heads to the beat.

But dementia patients can't do that and that creates an interesting paradox, Taylor said. The place where Kershaw's talents seem least appreciated may be where they are best put to use.

"Really (dementia patients) are the ones who need that kind of entertainment more," he said. "It's

stimulating for them."

Taylor said it's impossible to know just how much the soothing old songs affect people with Alzheimers or other forms of dementia. What he does know is that music has been known to affect the patients in incredible ways.

"This one lady we have," Taylor said, "she can sing every word of 'You Are My Sunshine,' but she can't even say 'hello.' I think that's really incredible."

Taylor also thinks it's incredible that week in and week out, regardless of the weather or whatever else he might like to do, Kershaw shows up to sit down at the piano and tickle the ivories for residents.

"When you give to others, you feel good," Taylor said. "When you give to others who can't give back, well ... it's a real testament to his character. There's not a lot of people like Jim out there. This guy just comes back year after year after year."