

Fulfilling dreams

Buddy Wilkins brightens the lives of Starcrest Nursing Home residents in Conyers

By Lee Kolb
Neighbor News Editor

Lively piano notes from the dayroom bounce down the antiseptic corridors of Conyers' Starcrest Nursing Home.

A white-haired man clad in a blue hat and jacket pounds out "Greensleeves" to a wheelchair-bound patient behind him. A moment later he strikes up another tune, and the young man nods his approval and smiles.

Buddy Wilkins is in his element. "I visit about 20 nursing homes in the metro area a month," the 54-year-old ex-Marine explained.

He does more than play the piano on these visits.

Wilkins' "profession" is fulfilling the dreams of those who otherwise could only dream - people in nursing homes forgotten by family and friends, "the people that don't have anybody."

Last Saturday Rockdale County Sheriff Vic Davis swore in George Robinson as an Honorary Sheriff's Deputy at Starcrest at Wilkins' bidding. Robinson, 31, lives at Starcrest and is confined to a wheelchair.

Wilkins maintains that involving police and military figures in these events demonstrates their accessibility.

Law enforcement officers "are not machines," he said. "They are human too."

Soon, Robinson's roommate James Hall will be made Honorary Chaplain of State Patrol Post 46 in Conyers.

Hall's honorarium will mark the 23rd wish Wilkins has orchestrated since he began listening to friends' dreams. Wilkins says he will seek to fulfill any wish as long as "it sounds sincere."

Five years ago, Wilkins brightened the twilight of an elderly Atlanta woman. "Her brother had just died," he recalled. Arranging for her to move from a heatless shack into a comfortable apartment, she died "in the peace she had always wanted."

Through Wilkins' efforts, a young boy dying of cancer was sworn in as a Marine "and buried with full military honors," and a man whose fantasy was to shake hands with a general and call him by his first name was made reality.

"People don't understand" what the forgotten and neglected must endure, Wilkins said.

He said his experiences in the Korean War endowed him with insight into the reality of enforced confinement.



Staff Photo by Kathryn Kalb

HONORARY APPOINTMENT: George Robinson is made an Honorary Sheriff's Deputy by Rockdale County Sheriff Vic Davis as Wilkins applauds.



Staff Photo by Kathryn Kalb

IN STARCREST NURSING HOME: Buddy Wilkins poses with his wife, Katherine.

Wilkins landed in Korea with the Marine Corps. He was captured in combat and endured two years in a North Korean prison camp.

"For fun, the guards would throw five apples into a mass of starving prisoners and watch them tear each other to pieces over the fruit," he recalled.

"They did not allow you to keep any of your dignity," he added.

Wilkins does not equate nursing homes with prison camps.

Rather, he believes a nursing home can be like a prison camp for a person abandoned by loved ones into stark white rooms, the monotony of routine, and the numbing pain of loneliness unrelieved by human contact.

"There is so much people can do but won't do," he said. Wilkins chastizes people who call themselves "Christians" while spending their money on themselves and going through the motions of prayer on Sunday.

"How many of them do you see going to help those who need it most?" he demands.

Wilkins' actions stem from his acceptance of the reality of his death.

Because of spreading melanoma cancer in his back, Wilkins will probably not live to celebrate his next birthday. His doctors have given him "a year, or maybe a year-and-a-half to live," he said.

"I have accepted the fact that I will die. You cannot enjoy living until you accept that you will die," he said.



Staff Photo by Kathryn Kalb

MARINE TURNED PIANO MAN: Wilkins (at keys) plays the piano for his friends George Robinson (left) and James Hall (right).