

Disabled adults singing Christmas carols to vets

Lifespire group brings holiday joy to residents at the St. Albans VA

by **AnnMarie Costella**

Assistant Editor

A group of developmentally disabled adults brought some holiday cheer to veterans living at the St. Albans VA home last Thursday by singing Christmas carols, rapping and dancing for them.

"I like the fact that they are young adults that are doing community service," said Dierdre Samuel, coordinator of volunteer services at the VA. "Even though they have any type of disability, it doesn't stop them from going out and doing good for the community."



A veteran listens to Christmas carols.

Members of the Lifespire nonprofit day program on Union Hall Street in Jamaica performed such favorites as "Deck the Halls," "Feliz Navidad" and "O Come All Ye Faithful," after which they spoke with the vets individually, wishing them good health and a happy holiday.

"It's wonderful to be here because they served our country," said Sentele Baker, a Lifespire client. "They fight the wars."

Baker was not shy when it came to performing and twirled fellow Lifespire member, Salilys Vasquez on the dance floor during some of the songs.

Vasquez said performing for the vets made her happy. "We owe a lot to them," she said. "It's very nice."

The 30-minute event took place in the dining hall at the veterans home on the VA campus. A handful of servicemen, most in wheelchairs, attended. Some clapped, some sang along and some simply slept through the entire length of the festivities.

"For the veterans, even though some of them were asleep, they were able to hear cognitively," Samuel said. "They may not be able to see or they may not be able to communicate, but just the fact that we are able to bring them out of their rooms helps."

Larry McKelton, 59, who served in the



Salilys Vasquez, left, of Lifespire dances with fellow member Sentele Baker as the group sang Christmas carols at the St. Albans VA.

PHOTOS BY ANNMARIE COSTELLA

Navy during the 1970s but was discharged early because he suffers from epilepsy, said he greatly enjoyed the performance and that it brings comfort to veterans at a time of year when they can feel especially sad.

"I think it's great because it uplifts us," McKelton said. "A lot of us, our families don't want to come to see us, so we feel a little lonesome and this makes us feel like someone cares about us."

This was not the first time Lifespire had visited the VA. They stopped by on Veterans Day and gave out greeting cards and handwritten notes of encouragement and thanks to the vets. The group also sang carols last December. Nadira Cumberbatch, a counselor with the group, hopes they can continue to do similar events more often, and perhaps make them an annual tradition.

"We love to see the smiles and the joy that it brings to them," Cumberbatch said. "It's the season of giving and it feels wonderful to give back to the community." □

Check out more pictures of the Lifespire group singing to vets at qchron.com.

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