

LIFTING VOICES, SPIRITS AND HEALTH SCORES

Jill Hilderman



He was just the chauffeur.

Angus McNee agreed to drive his wife Beryl and friend Carol to a *Silver Song Club* session in West Kelowna. The ladies fancied the idea of dropping-in to the singing group they'd read about. It was billed as non-performance, fun and requiring no lyrical talent. Instead, *Silver Song Clubs* are structured, participatory singing and music-making sessions with proven wellness outcomes; they are designed to enhance the physical and emotional well being of seniors who are aging at home and keen to 'get out'.

Angus took a chair with the intention to sit at the back or to pop out and run errands and collect the ladies after the 90 minute session. Instead, volunteers welcomed him into the circle and suggested he just sit and enjoy. Now, two years later, Angus belts out enduring sea shanties, Sinatra smoothies and show tunes with the more than 30 participants who come and enjoy the experience twice a month. And, he feels better for it too: "I'm glad I do it. It's a real pleasure; the opportunity to get together with a group of people singing their hearts out."

The west side group and two other *Silver Song Clubs* in Kelowna are offered free to area seniors by the Sing For Your Life Foundation, BC. It's the Canadian chapter of the U.K. originating charity started more than ten years ago. The proprietary program was developed in collaboration with the Sydney De Hann Research Centre for Arts and Health at Canterbury

Christchurch University in the U.K., which researches the value of music and the arts for well-being and health.

The Centre conducted the world's first randomized controlled trial on community singing, with older adults showing improvements in mental well-being. Their ongoing evaluations of the *Silver Song Club* model confirm that over time participants report an improved overall rating of physical health, have fewer doctor visits, and less unscheduled hospital visits; they tell of increased morale, less loneliness and improved respiratory function.

Silver Song Club meets in West Kelowna
Photo by Gary Nylander, The Daily Courier





Top: (l to r) – Carol, Angus, Beryl Photo by Gary Nylander, The Daily Courier

Above: Angus's 10-year old neighbour, Breckin, and the McNee family dog Toby. Photo by Angus McNee

Always creative, Angus doesn't consider himself a singer. Instead, a camera – and in recent years his Apple Mac computer – are his tools to creative expression. Born in Perth, Scotland, 73 years ago, he dabbled with photography as a young man. Working in the hotel industry he shot scenic photos for pleasure, and developed them at night in a darkened staff bathroom. It was a fortuitous entry into the British Navy's Fleet Photography Unit that was to hone his skills and build his passion. His role took him throughout the world recording the U.K.'s naval exercises with the fleets of smaller countries and documenting large-scale military events. His navy career was

followed by a stint with the Portsmouth Evening News where he met his future wife, Beryl, a journalist and editor. The couple immigrated to Canada in 1975, and Angus established his commercial photography business in Calgary. The oil patch kept him busy, and aerial photography became one of his specialties. He built added profile through his assignments for Maclean's Magazine, as their Western area photographer, and other large corporate accounts.

Now retired in Kelowna, and following nine years as a volunteer in the youth justice system, Angus is a committed mentor. Ten-year-old Breckin is a neighbourhood friend whom Angus has introduced to photography, badminton, music concerts and financial management (through the establishment of his first bank account). Breckin occasionally joins Angus and Beryl at a *Silver Song Club* session where intergenerational experiences are encouraged. Often a 16-year-old student musician will lead a hand chimes experience or a participant's toddler grandchild will be spotted perched among the percussion instruments.

Angus keeps his camera with him at all times. He's embraced the evolution to digital photography and is known to leap from the car to capture local sheep swarming their oat-laden owner or to record the weighed down boughs of a friend's apricot tree. Says Angus: "My computer keeps me young, and with it there is endless opportunity to be creative, regardless of my age."

ALIVE INSIDE is a celebrated documentary that won the Audience Award at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival. The full length movie is being screened in Kelowna on October 23, 2014 as a fundraiser for the Sing For Your Life Foundation, BC. *ALIVE INSIDE* is a powerful exploration of the human relationship to music. Click here to view the trailer, www.aliveinside.us Tickets are available for the documentary, or learn more about the evening by contacting www.singforyourlife-canada.org/

For the 2014–2015 schedule of *Silver Song Clubs* in the Okanagan visit: www.singforyourlife-canada.org or call 250.860.5408. No registration required; drop-in encouraged.