

Peter Roberts shows palliative care patient Judy Beresford how to play the harp.
Picture: Ian Kenins.



Peter Roberts

Peter Roberts was a well-established Geelong businessman when, at 48, he decided he wanted to do more with his life.

He didn't buy a sports car or try to reclaim his youth. Instead, Peter and his family packed up and moved to the United States for two years while he learnt how to play music to help comfort people facing the end of their lives.

"I had had a business, Roberts Interiors, for 18 years but decided I wanted to do more with my life," Peter said. "I had been naturally musical as a kid and learnt singing and violin and tinkered with a lot of other instruments ... guitar, drums, flutes, you name it, but I needed to develop special skills with harp and voice to do this work. "I put the other instruments aside when I decided to do this and do it properly."

Peter said it wasn't exactly a mid-life crisis, more a realisation of knowing what he didn't want to do any more. "And knowing that opened up this idea for me," he said.

"When I heard about what was being done to help people I was deeply touched. I'd been playing music for years but as I grew older I developed a growing interest in the therapeutic and spiritual aspects of music. This course seemed wonderful to me"

Peter said the harp is an effective instrument for helping patients because of the way its sound is produced. "Its sound can be very intimate and emotionally expressive. By playing in certain ways I can help people deal with breathing difficulties and manage pain. I can also offer emotional support through my music."

He is the only person in Australia who has completed the intensive course at St Patrick

"I'd been playing music for years but as I grew older I developed a growing interest in the therapeutic and spiritual aspects of music"

"There are some very emotional times, but it's not always sad. Often you come away being really touched by the beauty of what has transpired"

Hospital in Missoula, Montana. For the two years he was trained Peter took vocal and harp lessons while learning the theory and experiencing hands-on the impact of what could be achieved to ease suffering.

"It was music-related training program to assist people facing the end of their life. We learnt to take our cues from the patient and help them let go of anything impeding their leaving of life."

When Peter, his wife Jeanette and daughters Katherine and Ellise returned to Geelong in 1997 he was armed with the knowledge he could make a difference and a commitment to making his service available to anyone who wanted it.

"In the US this type of service was available to patients at no cost. It was a gift from the community," he said.

"After many years I realised I would never gain funding as an individual to be able to offer this palliative service at no charge to patients, as I wished.

So with the help of Melbourne solicitors Black Dawson, I established a non-profit charitable organisation called The Institute of Music in Medicine, which has been able to attract funding through philanthropic grants to support the work."

Funding from Geelong's United Way has enabled the Institute to employ Peter at the McKellar Palliative Care Unit one day a week, with Barwon Health funding a second day. All of his time there is spent with palliative care patients.

For two other days each week Peter is employed by St John of God Hospital where he weaves his magic to assist recovering patients, even in the special care nursery, where he plays to premature babies. "This is life-giving music" he said.

"At St John of God there are some really special moments when I am playing to the babies and their parents. I also play for patients in the critical care unit and for pre-op and post-op patients where I can help them rest and sleep, face difficulties and I can also help them celebrate life."

The St John of God Hospital Auxiliary gift shop also sells CDs of Peter's inspiring music. The Institute has also received funding from the Tattersall's Foundation which enables Peter to make his service available to patients in private homes, who are referred through the district nursing service.

"There are some very emotional times, but it's not always sad. Often you come away being really touched by the beauty of what has transpired," Peter said.

"It's about being instinctive to the patient and taking cues from the patient and their family. It's knowing when to leave the family in the privacy of their situation."

As part of the United Way funding, Emeritus Professor Helen Cox from Deakin University is conducting an evaluation of the benefits of Peter's music in end-of-life care, and through funding from the Annie Danks Trust evaluating the benefits of his music to the premature babies and their mothers.

Emeritus Professor Cox has become extremely supportive of the value of this music and has now joined the Board of The Institute of Music in Medicine to assist its development.

Peter said he often gets letters and cards from the families of people he has played for. He is especially honoured when asked to play at the funeral of someone he has cared for.

"It's a privilege to be doing this work, to have found this way of being," Peter said.

"It's by doing what I love to do that I have found a real sense of purpose in my new occupation. It's the satisfaction of feeling I am doing what I should be doing and can do well."

For more information about the Institute of Music in Medicine go to www.imim.com.au.

Jeanette Watt