



Despite suffering from dementia, 93-year-old still knows his way around a keyboard

By Ariel Barkhurst -- SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS

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Photo of Elbert Brown

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When Elbert Brown, who turns 93 Friday, was a little boy, he learned to play the piano from an unusual teacher.

He watched as the black and white keys plunked up and down by themselves on his family's little player piano. And then one day, he could play.

"He would always say, 'I just know the song in my head, and I can pick it out on the piano.' " says his daughter Cheri Newman.

That's how, from the age of about 7, Brown could play jaunty ragtime music for family and friends and more "spiritual" tunes for his church without ever having a lick of formal musical training.

And that's also how, despite the dementia that leaves him unable to remember the names of those he's known for years and conversations that took place five minutes ago, he is able, every Friday

morning, to play his ragtime pieces at the Kingsley Place at Oakwell Farms Emeritus senior living property during a weekly performance by a musical group from Trinity Baptist Church.

On a recent Friday, before Brown is asked to play, the audience of about 60 residents, staff, friends and families enjoys everything from country music to "Amazing Grace" played by a band composed of two guitarists, a drummer, a female pianist, four brass players, an electric accordion and a host of singers.

Then the informal master of ceremonies takes the microphone.

"Of course," he says, "Friday just wouldn't be Friday if we didn't hear from Mr. Brown."

Newman helps Brown to the piano, and, after a few minutes of gazing at the keys, he starts to play.

Brown's songs are upbeat, and as he plays, the drummer accompanies him softly while the other instrumentalists and the audience members tap their feet.

Brown is slightly disheveled this morning, wearing tan slacks and a gray-blue jacket as he pounds the piano keys. But no one is taking note of that during his jaunty performance, which would probably have been welcome entertainment at a Prohibition-era speak-easy.

After playing two pieces, Brown returns to his second-row seat as the audience claps and newcomers exclaim in amazement.

Brown has been playing piano most Friday mornings for about seven months now; he's been at Kingsley Place for only eight. Soon after he arrived, he attended the Friday morning musical performance put on by Trinity Baptist and was entranced by the female pianist.

"I said, 'My dad would like to meet you, because he's so intrigued by your piano playing,' " Newman recalls.

Brown also plays the piano, two or three times every day, in the memory care ward. When he plays there, his most important audience member is his wife Joe Ann, Newman's mother.

"Most of the time she doesn't know what's going on, but she knows when he plays," Newman says. "She perks up when he plays. Really, when he plays for memory care, you can see them all perk up."

Brown's musical ability mystifies most who hear him. But according to Donald Royall, professor and head of the division of ageing and geriatric psychiatry at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, it's common for dementia patients to remember motor skills.

"They may not remember the name of a bicycle or what it's for, but they can get on it and ride it," Royall says. "In dementia patients, what's damaged is the hippocampus. So what's most

affected is declarative memory — names, dates, facts — and episodic memory — what happened this morning or yesterday."

So the audience and the band may have been surprised the first time Brown played, but Royall wouldn't have been. And neither was Newman. She grew up listening to her father play, and his love for the piano has never slackened.

He jammed with a little band for a while during Newman's childhood, but he mostly played for friends and family.

"He just loves to play," Newman says. "I think that's what's kept him going all these years — there's something for him to do, besides eat his ice cream."