

Chaplain finds healing through harp music

By Victoria Terrioni



Ch. Lt. Col. Jan Koczera retired from the U.S. Army in August 2010. He is Associate Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Hamilton Square, New Jersey. He continues to play the harp.

When Jan Koczera returned to New Jersey after a year in Iraq in November 2005, he found that he had difficulty concentrating and often forgot things in his job as associate pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Hamilton Square. "The events of the past year seemed more real to me than what was currently happening at my church," he said. "It was extremely difficult to get organized enough to preach a sermon or to pay attention to the needy."

After a year as the solo Army Guard chaplain at his location, working every day with very few breaks took its toll on Koczera, now retired from the military. The church, recognizing he was in trouble, sent Koczera to a Christian counseling center in North Carolina for a week. The counselors tried to "make me see that I had neglected myself badly and that if I could pay attention to my own needs and take the rest and meditation that I needed, I would refill again."

Although Koczera appreciated the advice, true healing came when he discovered the harp as a tool in his recovery. "The congregation heard of Bedside Harps and had them come in one Sunday," Koczera said. "I felt better just hearing the notes played on the harp."

That Koczera felt better wasn't surprising, as that is why the group formed in the first place. According to the website, the organization's "mission is to promote the therapeutic use of

the harp in healthcare." Since opening the doors in 2002, the organization has graduated 100 certified harp therapists throughout the United States who have played to 44,542 patients at six hospitals hosting the program. Additionally, 600 people have learned to play the harp for their own healing and enjoyment.

And Koczera is one of those people. Although Koczera has made it half way through his 120-hour certification process, a medical issue caused him to put that process on hold.

"I'm still making my way back from that, but even without the certification, I am planning to keep the harp in my life." Bedside Harp studios harp music is beneficial to patients and hospital staff members by reducing stress, anxiety, and blood pressure. "The harp has very unique qualities," said Edie Elkin, founding director of Bedside Harp. "You hug it, lean it up against your heart and receive the vibrations."

It is also Biblical. King David played a variation of the harp to soothe King Saul and then to soothe himself in troubling times. When playing one of the 23 vibrating harp strings it sets off another, according to Elkin. Need one more reason to be convinced that the harp is an appropriate healing tool? "The harp is associated with angels," Elkin adds, "which doesn't hurt."

"Something in the vibrations allows us to respond and helps us step back, relax and get re-centered," Koczera said, adding that harp music and his ministry now go hand-in-hand. "They complement each other," he said.

"We have medical technology and high technology, but it is not good if the patient is full of anxiety. The harp has immediate results without side effects," Koczera said.

He plays the Celtic harp, a portable version. In fact, it is so portable that Koczera took it with him on his second tour of Iraq in June 2008. Bedside Harps provided the harp and a shipping case so Koczera could take it with him.

According to Koczera, the Celtic harp is set up to play songs without any major key changes. It is set up in the key of C,

and all of the popular music that people sing to is in the key of C. "You can be terrible on the harp and still sound good," he said.

As Koczera found out in his own life, harp music does have healing powers. "It helped me to center and spoke for me when I was not able to speak or put to words what I was going through," he said.

"Some soldiers made a joke about my harp, saying that I had a halo and wings or that when they heard it they were afraid that they were about to leave this world. Others didn't say much but, after we returned, I was told by several about how helpful it was and how it was a bit of peace in the midst of so much chaos. The Iraqis that heard my playing were almost always very enthusiastic, telling me how the harp had originated in their country and enjoying the music I played. I had the impression that they were starved for music," he said.



Ch. Lt. Col. David Terrioni and his wife, Victoria, live in Oklahoma, where he is the Installation Chaplain at Tinker AFB. Victoria has been a newspaper reporter and editor since 1981 and a freelance writer since 1992. The Terrionis are preparing for a move to Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Maui.

For more information, about harp ministry or Bedside Harp, go to www.bedsideharp.com.