

Cancer free, jazz artist fulfills promise to play at hospital

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Jazz artist Joseph Torregano promised his doctor that if he beat his cancer, he'd bring a concert to the hospital as a way to say thanks.

He kept that promise with a free concert for patients, staff and visitors at Baton Rouge General's campus off Bluebonnet.

Torregano was treated at the hospital's Pennington Cancer Center for eight months this year for stage IV non-Hodgkin lymphoma.

His last chemotherapy treatment was on Oct. 5, he said, and he's free of the cancer.

Torregano, who has played his clarinet for presidents and recorded with Paul McCartney, told the audience gathered on the second-floor mezzanine, "The greatest blessing is to play for people like you."

A native of New Orleans, Torregano has performed in countries around the world, and has played with such jazz talents as Lionel Hampton, Buddy Rich and Harry Connick Jr.

The 1970s were marked by a number of especially high-profile gigs for Torregano.

He played for President Richard Nixon in New Orleans in 1974 and for President Jimmy Carter at the White House in 1978, according to a biography provided by Baton Rouge General.

Torregano played a British Broadcasting Corp. broadcast for Queen Elizabeth's 25th wedding anniversary in 1972 and recorded with former Beatle Paul McCartney in New Orleans in 1975.

Another career highlight was his appearance in the 1993 comedy movie "Undercover Blues," with Kathleen Turner and Dennis Quaid.

New Orleans Magazine named Torregano its "All Star Traditional Jazz Clarinetist" in April 2003.

Alongside his performing career, Torregano, who's 58 and lives in LaPlace, has also shared his musical gifts with students.

He retired this past April after 35 years as band director of East St. John High School in Reserve.

Torregano was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a cancer of the white blood cells, in February of this year.

“I was diagnosed the day after the Super Bowl. Thank God I got to see the Saints win, if I had ‘checked out,’” he said, smiling.

On Oct. 30, The Joseph Torregano Jazz Quartet brought its music to Baton Rouge General.

At one point, the quartet played “Georgia on My Mind,” in honor of Torregano’s oncologist Dr. Georgia Reine of the Hematology/Oncology Clinic, who stood in the crowd enjoying the music.

“It’s very, very heartwarming, touching,” Reine, fighting back tears, said of Torregano’s concert at the hospital.

“It makes you feel like you did something good,” she said.

At the end of the roughly one-hour performance, “Bye, Bye Birdie” was the jazz quartet’s closing number; it’s one that Torregano said he likes to sign off with.

Other members of the quartet include Joseph Torregano’s brother Michael Torregano on the keyboard; Oliver “Stick” Felix on bass; and Bob French on drums.

Joseph Torregano encouraged the audience at the hospital to support cancer treatment and research through donations or volunteer work.

“It’s so important. I didn’t know how many people it affected” until his experience with cancer, Torregano said.

“It has changed my life,” he said.

“I will be back next year in October and every October until I can’t do this anymore,” he said.