

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

# SUPER SWEET

All-girl group Sugartime loves to sing, share it with others

By **Rebecca Roybal Jones**

## For the Journal

At times, Sugartime performs for an audience that's unable to clap or that doesn't seem to hear them. But the singers know that for at least one person in the audience, the music is making a connection.

Karen Walker, 62, Marti Brandtner, 66, and Jeanne Brown, 56, are Sugartime, and volunteer many weekends to get dressed up and sing and dance before folks at senior centers, retirement homes and hospitals. They bring along their PA system and karaoke machine. They sing tunes spanning decades from the 1930s to the 1960s — Frank Sinatra, the Everly Brothers, Bobby Darin, Peggy Lee and more.

Sugartime also performed at the mayor's State of the City address last November.

The factor the singers have in common is that they have shared the same dream.

Walker, an author who is retired from public relations, says, "We fantasized about being an all-girl group like the Supremes."

"We're all boomers singing to people in their 80s," she adds.

Brandtner, who is a retired labor and delivery nurse, says she's been singing all her life and is happy to share it with others.

"We're doing it because we love to sing," she says. "(We) thought it would be a good way to sing in front of people who are not able to leave their homes. A lot of times families don't visit ... and music just seems to lighten them up. It's kind of our service to the community."

She adds that she's always wanted to sing in a group.

"I do think we bring a lot of joy to these people and we get that in return," Brandtner says.

Folks sing along

Sugartime performed on a recent Saturday afternoon at the Bear Canyon Estates in northeast Albuquerque. Clad in matching lavender chiffon dresses, they opened with "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend."

Only a few listeners showed up at first — the facility's elevator wasn't working — but by the end of the show about two dozen folks watched the performance.

With toes or fingers tapping, some seniors in their seats sang along to songs such as "Put a Little Love in Your Heart."

After finishing the show with "Sentimental Journey," the singers shook hands with members of their audience.

"I was singing along with it," Marilyn Barr, 78, said after the show. "I'm glad they came."

Her husband of 57 years, Donald Barr, 79, said he enjoyed the music.

"It's songs from our time," he says. "They harmonize really nicely."

Mary Lou McKibben says she enjoyed hearing "Sentimental Journey." "I had a husband in the service and we didn't know when they were coming home."

Another resident, Fern Vittitow, 81, says she thought all the songs were good ones.

"We're all old and they played very, very old songs."

'Music is healing'

Walker and Brandtner met during singing lessons. Brown is the newest member, and Sugartime has been around for almost three years. The group rehearses twice a week; they perform two to four times a month. The shows are free but occasionally facilities will offer a donation that is used for equipment.

Since the group formed, Walker says she's invested thousands of dollars in equipment. Their mission: "To cheer people up as much as we can and we cheer ourselves up at the same time," says Walker.

Walker says that at one retirement home they performed at, an Alzheimer's patient sitting in a wheelchair appeared incoherent, not responding to any of the music. Then they began to sing "Que Sera Sera" ("Whatever Will Be Will Be") and he started singing along. Walker says that anecdote almost brings her to tears.

"Music is healing," she says.

Brandtner says the group sings a variety of music — pop, country and some Spanish — in an effort to reach out to everyone in the audience.

"We feel that if we have a variety — I sing Spanish also — we'll appeal to a lot of people. I think that makes a difference."

They try to keep the music upbeat and peppy.

"We don't want to put anyone to sleep," Brandtner says. "We think about the residents. We don't want to sing anything depressing."

Brown, who is a property manager, says she's enjoyed singing with Sugartime.

"It's wonderful. I got a degree in music ... I had plans of doing something with music," she says.

Brown says she sang with the Dallas Symphony Chorus for a while but she stopped to pursue her career. In fact, she didn't sing for 20 years.

"It's been so fun," Brown says. "It's something I've wanted to do all my life ... it's kind of a dream come true for all of us."

She enjoys belting out tunes from "Funny Girl" and "Les Miserables."

"They (the residents) aren't physically able to go to a concert so it's really nice to have someone perform for them," Brown says. "And hopefully they're songs they'll know and remember."

For information on booking Sugartime, call 344-1387.



MARLA BROSE/JOURNAL

From left, Karen Walker, Marti Brandtner and Jeanne Brown perform as Sugartime at the Bear Canyon Estates retirement community. The group sings tunes from the '30s to the '60s.