

# THE CAPITAL TIMES

Column: Musician devoted to good deeds

Doug Moe — 6/30/2007 8:46 am

WHEN RICH Baumann was playing music for change on State Street two decades ago, he probably never dreamed he'd be responsible for getting an \$8,000 cello into the hands of a gifted young musician in New Orleans, then jamming with the kid, who had a smile brighter than a Louisiana sunrise.

Last weekend, Baumann, still in Madison but no longer on the street, brought to New Orleans a cello handmade by the Milwaukee artisan Korinthia Klein, and handed it to 17-year-old Jeffrey Wilson, a highly touted cellist whose family circumstances had kept him from ever playing an instrument commensurate with his gift.

It was a special moment, and all in a day's work for Baumann, a wandering troubadour who has managed to make a career out of bringing good cheer to people who can use it.

Now 52, Baumann was born in Sheboygan and came to Madison in 1986. Previously he had played the fiddle in what he calls a "wonderful" band that couldn't keep it together financially. That's not unusual -- music is a hard dollar. What was out of the ordinary was Baumann's response. He left the band and came to Madison determined to make a living as a street musician on State Street. Baumann wasn't destitute -- he owned property in northern Wisconsin -- but he thought the year on the street might, as he put it, "polish my chops."

He plays guitar as well as fiddle, and he started strumming on State Street with his guitar case open beside him. It has been 20 years, but Baumann still remembers his first day's take -- \$3.72. He put a buck's worth of gas in his van, got a slice of Rocky's, and banked what was left. Soon he was making \$5 a day and living so simply -- sleeping in the van -- that after two weeks he could plop down \$50 for a mandolin-banjo. He's never looked back.

Over the years Baumann's stage has changed, but it's still all about connecting with his audience. What he does now, for the most part, is play senior facilities and day care centers. The money isn't huge but it's enough, and Baumann's warm and witty mix of music and storytelling has generated great word of mouth. He estimates he's played more than 1,000 senior centers and nearly as many day care facilities.

Baumann's open secret is that he is an aggressive marketer -- an artist unafraid to sell himself, which is itself so unusual that Baumann occasionally gives speeches titled "I love cold calling." If he lands a gig somewhere, Baumann will work the area phone book as well as the Internet and turn the one job into five.

Baumann, who lives in Madison with his wife, antiques appraiser Shirley Baumann, has recently launched a pet program that he calls "The Million Closets Project," the name taken from a poem Baumann wrote lamenting all the musical instruments that for one reason or another sit unused in closets around the world.

The \$8,000 cello didn't come out of a closet, but it came indirectly from the project. Last year, at a convention at Monona Terrace, Baumann had met someone from the Louisiana Arts Council, a meeting that resulted in Baumann playing a number of gigs in the state (and, true to form, in states all the way from Wisconsin to the Gulf Coast). On that trip Baumann also passed out instruments he had received through the Million Closets Project.

It was such a rewarding trip that Baumann was thinking of going back this coming fall. Then, after he spoke about the trip and Million Closets on WORT-FM, his timetable got moved up. Listeners phoned the radio station offering flutes and guitars and saxophones. Still others offered to help pay for gas. And then, finally, a listener called and told Baumann, "You have to meet my friend Peter Spring."

Spring is a philanthropist who moved his foundation from Ashland, Ore., to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Spring's group also donates musical instruments, and after hearing Spring talk about the effort on National Public Radio, Korinthia Klein, a Milwaukee musician and instrument builder, contacted Spring and offered the handmade cello.

When Rich Baumann contacted Spring to introduce himself, Baumann said he was planning a return trip to Louisiana in the fall. Spring told Baumann about the cello in Milwaukee, adding that they had found the perfect recipient -- a 17-year-

old in New Orleans with talent but limited resources. Could Baumann make the trip sooner?

"I checked my schedule," Baumann was saying this week, "and I made it work." He took the cello -- and a carload of other donated instruments -- to New Orleans.

Last Saturday in Louisiana, Baumann, Spring and a few others were on hand when Jeffrey Wilson opened the case and took out his new cello. The young man tuned it, tentatively at first, and then began to play.

"He was an incredible player," Baumann said. Soon Spring had picked up a guitar, and Baumann a fiddle. There will be other, bigger, more important gigs for Jeffrey Wilson -- for all of them -- but few more memorable.