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House Concerts marks 10 years

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For the past decade, Russ and Julie Paris of Oak Park have removed their living room furniture once a month so that scores of people could come over and enjoy live music.

On Saturday, January 20, more than 100 music lovers filled the couple's home to mark a milestone — the 10th anniversary of Russ and Julie's House Concerts. It was the couple's 102nd monthly concert.

"It's our way of promoting wonderful music that's out there that nobody gets to hear," Julie Paris said. "You never know what's going to touch someone. Music is magic."

This concert was a celebration of music, friendship, history and the importance of school music programs. In the audience were veteran and first-time house concertgoers, former house concert performers, friends and family.

"They've had such a great variety of performers over the years," said longtime guest Susan Kaye of Oak Park. "A big part of it is the warmth and hospitality of the Paris family."

"It's such a wonderful, intimate setting, like being in a cozy coffee shop. I feel like I'm back in college again," said Kathy Toomayan of Oak Park, who was attending her first house concert.

Unlike previous concerts, in which the voluntary \$15 donation per guest went to the performer, the musicians donated their time to support Oak Park High School's band program. Guests contributed \$20 each, raising more than \$2,000. The Parises' son, Michael, a junior at Oak Park High, has been in district bands for the past six years.

"How wonderful that Russ and Julie pulled this together, that the artists donated their time for the school. It's tremendous," said Oak Park Unified School District board member Jan Iceland, who attended the concert with her husband, Steve.

Oak Park's new band director, Daniel O'Brien, in the audience with his wife, Tracie, also expressed appreciation.

Rather than featuring one or two acts, as past concerts had, a lineup of nine acts performed. They included artists who helped the cou-

ple get started, such as Severin Browne and James Coberly Smith, who played the first house concert in February 1997; Laurence Juber, the lead guitarist for Paul McCartney's band Wings; and Wendy Waldman, a singer, songwriter and producer who has written for Linda Ronstadt, Bette Midler and Vanessa Williams ("Save the Best for Last").

The musicians repeatedly thanked the Parises for providing a venue for musicians.

"You sure don't find all that cool music on the radio, now do you folks?" Waldman said during her set. "I love what the audience takes back from the music."

Eric Lowen and Dan Navarro performed despite Lowen's amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, which has disabled him. The duo has written music for Pat Benatar ("We Belong"), the Bangles and the Temptations. Lowen promised the Parises that he'd be at the anniversary concert "no matter what shape I'm in" to show his appreciation for their support.

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“Eric was diagnosed three years ago, and it’s been an emotional experience for us,” Julie Paris said.

Russ Paris thanked their three sons—Daniel, Michael and Joshua — and the family’s neighbors for supporting the program. Many were in the audience.

“Before our kids were old enough to help move furniture we knocked on neighbors’ doors for help,” Russ Paris said.

“We have a close neighborhood and for us it’s been a really nice social thing,” said Janet Robertson, who lives across the street and has attended the concerts for many years with her husband, Scott.

Russ Paris has been a music lover since childhood when he collected 45 rpm records of hit songs. As an adult, he found enjoying live music a challenge.

“It was a real ordeal. Finding and paying a babysitter, fighting traffic and crowds, paying for tickets and parking. And you never got to meet the musicians,” Julie Paris said.

Everything changed in 1996 after the couple attended a CD release party and concert in a friend’s backyard. Severin Browne, a former Motown artist, was the featured singer/songwriter. The couple invited Browne to perform in their home, and Russ and Julie’s House Concerts was on its way.

“For that first concert we walked around the neighborhood handing out invitations to people we didn’t even know,” Julie Paris said.

Her parents were nervous about the couple holding concerts in their home because they thought musicians were “strange people with long hair.” The



SOPHIA FISCHER/Acorn Newspapers

AT HOME WITH MUSIC - Russ and Julie Paris, who host monthly acoustic performances in their Oak Park home, commemorate the 10th anniversary of Russ and Julie’s House Concerts. Friends Wendy Waldman, far left, and Severin Browne, far right, help them celebrate.

couple quickly learned that musicians were “real people with families, stories and lives.” They hosted the performers in their home, becoming close friends with many.

“This helped our kids to accept people of all different backgrounds and types,” Julie Paris said.

Fifty people attended the first concert. Now the pair are known as the gurus of house concerts, receiving requests from musicians daily and booking acts a year ahead from all over the country. An e-mail list of 850 recipients receives a monthly newsletter and concert invitation. The couple have helped others start similar programs, and were instrumental in founding the western chapter of Folk Alliance, which fosters folk music and dance.

“These musicians travel around the country, usually performing in bars, clubs, singing over other activities,” Julie Paris said. “They’re not used to people sitting quietly, listening.”

Others who’ve played in the Parises’ living room are Jim Messina from the ‘60s band Buffalo Springfield and the ‘70s band Loggins and Messina; and Karla Bonoff, who’s written songs for and recorded with Neil Young, Ronstadt and others.

The Parises’ thick scrapbook documents the musicians who’ve played at their home over the years. Julie Paris is known for her homebaked treats which guests and musicians enjoy while mingling during intermission. Russ and Julie Paris visibly enjoy the music, sharing a dance during concerts.

“As much as we do for others, we get it back in spades,” she said.

The next house concert, Saturday, February 10, features award-winning songwriter Richard Berman.

For information, visit:
<http://www.houseconcerts.us>