

A photograph of Tim McLoone, an older man with grey hair, wearing a brown jacket, speaking into a microphone. The background is blurred with blue and purple stage lights.

# TIM McLOONE

*The Heart, the Healing, and the Hello Behind*

## HOLIDAY EXPRESS

This fall, it will be 25 years since Tim McLoone first decided to form a traveling holiday band; one that would play for free in the kinds of places that never seemed to get much attention during the holidays. Over the course of these past 25 years, Holiday Express has grown from a handful of helpers to more than 150 musicians and thousands of other volunteers who plan and manage events, pack gift bags, load vans, don costumes, paint faces, serve food, play games, hold hands, and then – do it all over again, day after day.

In its first year, Holiday Express did ten shows. In 2017, they presented 100. Each year, the organization must raise \$1.5 million in cash and in-kind contributions to pay for it all. Is it worth it? Ask any volunteer, including Tim. “No one ever leaves Holiday Express,” he says. “It’s too rewarding.” Now 70, Tim has no intention of leaving, either. Holiday Express has a strong board, a committed family of volunteers, and a mission that is unlikely to become obsolete.

“The first five years, we were, in a sense,

very proud of ourselves that we were doing this nice thing,” Tim explains. But he has come to see the mission of Holiday Express as a two-way street. “I think that by doing this grand gesture, doing these extravagant things for people, we came to understand that we were receiving like crazy.”

It took the group a few years to find the places they were needed most. “People have the misconception that we play mostly to children,” he notes. “But we really play more for what I call ‘adult orphans,’ such as people in residential psychiatric facilities where many will spend their entire lives. They’ve lost the concept of home and family. Their dream is to end up in a group home.”

Today, Holiday Express has two primary selection criteria for the agencies it visits. “One, if we were not there, you got little or nothing at all at holiday time,” Tim states. “Or, two: Your need is so great that we don’t care if you’re getting a lot of attention. We’re happy to be part of it.”

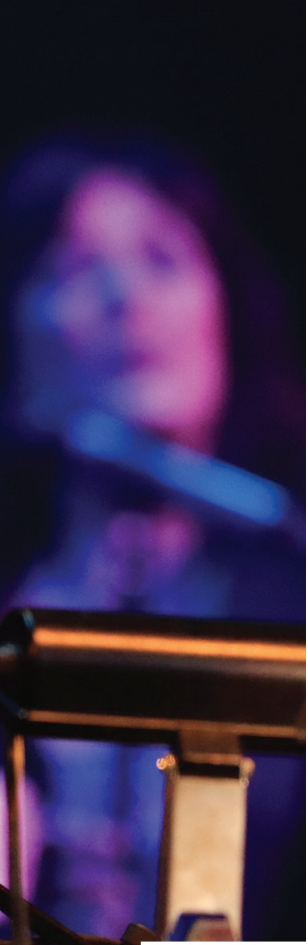
At A. Harry Moore School in Jersey

City, he says, “The children are so ill, and there’s a lot of poverty. Every year, we see the same caregivers, holding onto little ones. And some of those kids die every year.” The experiences are eye-opening. “We’ve been allowed into a world where we observe human suffering in a positive atmosphere. The courage and kindness of the caregivers Holiday Express has encountered never ceases to amaze me.”

One year, at the New Lisbon Developmental Center, Tim noticed a caregiver maneuvering a push crate holding a large, profoundly disabled man. “She included him in everything that we did.” When he praised her for her outstanding efforts after the show, she responded, “I love my job. If I was ever told I wasn’t allowed to work here for some reason, I’d be heartbroken.” “We hear that over and over,” Tim says.

On December 21, 2015, Holiday Express presented its 1,000th show at NJEDDA High School in Clifton. “Cerebral Palsy is like an atomic bomb going off in a family,” explains Tim, whose own





nephew, Steven, had CP as a consequence of having been briefly deprived of oxygen at birth. At the NJEDDA High School, most of the kids can't communicate and are not ambulatory. And yet, he adds, "The love in that room is palpable. You can actually feel it. I struggle to keep my composure while I'm there."

Each December, the band visits Blythedale Children's Hospital in Valhalla, New York, joining WCBS-FM radio host Scott Shannon and several celebrities for an on-air show. Twenty-five-year-old outpatient Lanie Pearce is a huge music fan who has Cerebral Palsy. She always sits as close as she can to the broadcast stage. When she sees Tim, "she gets very excited and flails around in her wheelchair," he smiles. But when she catches sight of Rob Thomas, former front man of Matchbox 20, "She practically flips herself out of her chair."

It is Lanie who is responsible for the most startling individual moment Tim has experienced in Holiday Express. A year ago, he received an email he didn't recognize. "Hi, Tim - It's Lanie," the email read. "Lanie who?" he asked. "Lanie from Blythedale," she told him. After they'd been exchanging emails for a while, Tim asked her, "We're friends, right?" Lanie agreed. "Can I ask you how you're

doing this?" he inquired. "With my eyes," Lanie told him. With the help of assistive speech technology, Lanie can now "type" with her eyes. "It's been an astonishing relationship," he says. "I hear from her every day now. She's smart, she's funny, she's sarcastic, and, sometimes, she's angry, just like we all are."

At some point in the Holiday Express journey, Tim came to a realization that forever changed his understanding of Holiday Express. "I realized we were all healing ourselves - everybody in Holiday Express. We were healing from all the things that happened in our own lives. I wasn't thinking about those things when we started." For 48 days each year, members of Holiday Express are reminded at every stop that no human being can be defined by their limitations; that what each of us needs is more understanding, not more judgment, he states. "We've all been educated. My kids will tell you - if we're walking on the boardwalk and somebody comes along in a wheelchair, I'm going over and saying hello."

Twenty-five years later, the healing continues, as Holiday Express delivers - and receives - countless joyful, emotional, and meaningful hugs of hello.

