

LOCAL

Sweet sounds: Workers de-stress at West Side Bakery with help of Decompression Chamber



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Staff at the West Side Bakery got to take a special breather from their busy holiday baking Thursday morning to listen to classical guitar music by local artist James Marron.

The musical visit was a surprise for a dozen bakers and decorators in the production kitchen, housed in a separate building behind the retail bakery where four customer service employees were surprised next with the second part of Marron's musical performance.

The bakers, who start as early as 3 a.m., are in their busy season as West Side Bakery, based in West Akron, sees a 150% increase in business in December compared to non-holiday months.

"Always the holidays are so stressful for everybody here because it's two weeks in November and basically the whole month of December that's so nonstop for them," said Barb Talevich, co-owner with her husband, Steve.

The bakery, which has 31 employees, has had the added pressure of being understaffed over the past couple years due to COVID-19. But that hasn't stopped its employees from working hard to deliver on the high expectations that the community has for West Side Bakery's beautiful cakes, pies and other baked goods, Talevich said.

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"You can't stop making beautiful cakes," said Talevich, whose bakery will celebrate its 28th year in West Akron in January.

Newer employee Jessie Milligan cited the pressure of fulfilling orders on time and making sure people have good birthdays, holidays and special occasions.

"It's stressful, especially during the holidays," Milligan said.

Marron performed Thursday with Tuesday Musical's Decompression Chamber series, which launched in 2017 to provide free, 45-minute concerts by chamber musicians to staff and clients at high-pressure work sites. Musicians have performed at workplaces including the Akron Municipal Court Building, Summit County Juvenile Court, Summit County Probate Court, Akron General Medical Center, and for frontline workers at Summit County Public Health and Akron Children's Hospital.

More: Tuesday Musical serenades Summit courthouse crowd with Valentine's Day treat

At West Side Bakery, Marron created an environment for employees to relax amid their bustling holiday work.

"[It's] just the idea of being able to do something that brings them a little bit of peace and calm during their crazy day and lets them know how much we care about them and appreciate them and how important they are all to us," Talevich said.

She surprised her staff by bringing out charcuterie trays and asking them to take it easy for a bit to enjoy the music and food.

Marron played everything from Bach to "Stormy Weather" to his own composition "In the Clearing."

"This is kind of fun to be in the middle of something different," said the guitarist, playing seated on a stool on one side of the large production kitchen amid huge, industrial-sized mixers, numerous prep tables, many containers of icing and a massive bowl of chocolate ganache.

One person's decompression music may not be the same as another person's, including Christmas music, Marron said.

"We love Christmas music," Assistant Manager Emily King responded. "Once we start rolling the red and green cookies out, we get in the spirit."

With that, Marron launched into "Deck the Halls."

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Taking deep breaths

Cyndee Snider, executive director for Tuesday Musical, said the Decompression Chamber is all about taking some deep breaths before going about your busy day.

"We know that listening to classical music helps to soothe us. We need a little bit of that. OK, we need a LOT of that these days," she said.

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Employee Jordan Wurst was touched by the musical experience.

"I thought it was a nice surprise and it was a nice gesture," Wurst said.

Marron, who teaches classical guitar performance at the University of Akron, talked about growing up in rural western New York and attending the Manhattan School of Music. He moved in 1987 to Akron, where he collaborates with numerous artists, plays classical guitar with the Cleveland Orchestra when he's needed and also helps organize Highland Square's PorchRokr.

Before he played one of his favorites, "Danza Brasileira," he shared that he grew up the seventh of eight children in a family that played folk music together.

Bakery owner Talevich stressed concerns about mental health in the workplace since the pandemic began, as did General Manager Bria Kessel.

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"I think it's the most important thing to take care of employees and make sure they feel like family," Kessel said. "I feel that way every day."

In the retail bakery building, a handful of customers and retail staff got to hear Marron play music, including "Joy to the World" and "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." Employees Gabi Hoffman, Hannah Richards, Heike Roberson and Isabel Tomic enjoyed sitting down for a snack and listening.

"They're never brought music in before so that's really lovely," Hoffman said.

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