

Visser, Tom

Stirling man lives life singing for smiles

BY JANET RICHARDS

Stirling – You might have seen him at the organ in the front of a department store, or preaching at a local church, or singing at a retirement home, hospital or other venue. Wherever he goes, he hopes to leave a smile on the faces of those he visits.

Tom Visser, also known as “Brother Tom” and the “Singing Dutchman,” has lived in the Stirling area with his wife Patricia for a year-and-a-half. With his white beard and wooden shoes around his neck, Visser gets recognized when he is out in the community.

Visser’s life experiences have given him many stories to relate, and earlier this year, a book about his life written from his own notes, “Brother Tom The People’s Preacher,” was published.

From his childhood in Holland during the occupation of the Nazis, to time in the air force, to living on the streets in Montreal, Visser’s stories are many and varied. He also speaks several languages, including Dutch, German, Hebrew and French.

“There were times when I could hardly rub two nickels together and a time I financed the tuition for 23 students in college,” Visser said.

He became a Christian in 1960, he said, and later an ordained minister.

Visser has prayed with people on the streets and in bars, acted as chaplain for hospitals and jails in western Ontario, and led prayer meetings at Gore Park in Hamilton. It is acts of faith rewarded that he has experienced that led to his love of sharing a message of “a better life” with

people.

“Going to church week after week does not make you a Christian,” Visser said. “It’s your relationship with God.”

Visser and his late wife Tina operated a foster home, taking in 70 young people over 30 years. He was also known for literally giving the coat off his back.

“I can never out-give God,” Visser said.

In later years he has met some of the people he fostered; once he was pulled over by a police officer he had “taken off the street” 27 years earlier.

Even with his busy ministries, Visser found time to share another love, music. He played accordion at the beginning of the CBC show “Country Hoedown” with Gordie Tap and he also sang and preached on CHCH Television in Hamilton.

Able to play 14 instruments, Visser has played the pipe organ using his feet, his accordion with one hand and a trumpet with the other, and the accordion and harmonica together.

“Music has always been my thing,” Visser said. He even came out of the operating room in Kingston after a triple bypass last Christmas singing and went on to sing for other patients, he said. Until his heart surgery last year, Visser had spent recent Christmases in Florida where he would perform as the “singing Santa.”

Even the story of how Visser and his wife came to live in Stirling is an interesting one. The couple, living in Montreal at the time, had stopped in Belleville to have a flat tire fixed on their RV and they overheard some people at the shop talking about a house that was going to be sold. Visser ended up making contact with the



■ “Brother” Tom Visser with one of his accordions in his Stirling-area home.

Photo by Janet Richards

owner and purchasing the house before it went on the market.

“We love it here,” Visser said. Despite having a heart operation and recent surgeries on both eyes, Visser has maintained a positive outlook and tries to share it as often as possible.

“The greatest thing is to see a smile on people’s faces,” said Visser, who sums it up with: “Life is good.”

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