

# Jim Hughes retires after 48 years at St. Catherine's Church piano

Longtime musical director plans to travel, worship in free time

By Kyla Woodard  
For Clay Today

ORANGE PARK — For Jim Hughes, music is a way of life, a melody that brings an inner peace inside of him that he can't shake.

"That is when I feel closest to God and to the Lord. That is also when I feel closest to my faith community here. To be able to lead them in song," Jim Hughes said.

From a young age, Hughes has been spreading his gift throughout the walls of St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church, leaving a lasting mark on those around him.

But, after 48 years, Jim Hughes is saying goodbye to his special spot in front of the piano. Packing up his once-busy office and giving a final farewell as the devoted music director that changed the sounds of music from what it had always been.

As Hughes retires from his long-running position, he leaves a legacy that will be hard to replace.

His strong ties with the church began back in 1975. With his father in the military, Hughes said his family had transferred to Orange Park, near the church. Hughes said it was always a tradition for his family to find a Catholic church to be a part of, wherever they were.

"We always, as a family, every Sunday, no matter where we were, we found a Catholic church if we were out of town and in the state. So, this is where our family started to attend," Hughes said.

Hughes said his mother introduced him to then pastor, Father Edward Rooney.

"We moved here at the end of July. By the first week in September, I was playing one of the masses," Hughes said.

With the church being new at the time, Hughes said he brought much of his knowledge to the then-small parish.

"They had a traditional choir, but they didn't have any more contemporary sound masses. So, that's what I brought to St. Catherine's first. And [I] introduced a lot of new music for them," Jim Hughes said.

Father Rooney said he remembered when he met Hughes for the first time. The retired pastor told at that moment; he knew Hughes was a force to be reckoned with.

"Shortly after he moved in, I heard him play the guitar and recognized his talents. We had a folk group going at the time, and I asked Jim if he could accept the folk group's leadership, and he willingly said yes," Father Rooney said.

Hughes said his leadership started with one mass. Every year he picked up more.



Jim Hughes will step away from the piano at St. Catherine's of Siena Catholic Church after playing there for 48 years. Hughes also worked as a teacher in Clay County.

That was mainly due to his dual dedication as an elementary-level Clay County school system teacher. In college, Hughes said education wasn't his plan. Initially studying music, some clashing with his music professors propelled his path in a different direction.

"I was starting not to like music, and music was too important in my life not to like it. So, I went into education," Hughes said.

Teaching for 37 years, when Hughes fi-

nally retired, he was able to become a full-time music director at the church. He said he went from doing one mass to several every week.

Shelly Hughes witnessed her husband's transition into full-time music ministry. Shelly met Jim when they were both members of the church. Jim's musical talent remains influential in their story. So much so that Shelly said she is not sure they would've ever met without it.

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When Jim first became music director at the church, Shelly said it was around that time that she decided to audition for the choir. Due to circumstances, Shelly said the commitment didn't last.

However, her connection to Jim did. The two would go on to run into each other several times, but Shelly said she didn't think anything of it.

"It didn't stick in my head. Neither of us ... in our head," Shelly said.

The next time the two met was for a church retreat to Orlando. Shelly said Jim tooted his guitar around and never went anywhere without it. On the way there, the entire van decided to sing commercial jingles to bypass the long ride.

Playing by ear, she said Jim entertained the entire bus with melodic tunes. However, she said one jingle was hard for everyone to remember.

"Right before we got to the Serendipity, we were stuck on the old Kentucky Fried Chicken commercial jingle and we couldn't figure it out," Shelly said.

After the group dispersed, she didn't see Jim again until her next break. Later, feeling an arm wrap around her shoulder, Shelly said she turned to see Jim leaning into her ear.

"He sang the commercial jingle for Kentucky Fried Chicken, 'Get a bucket of chicken', and I was like, 'Oh my God, I'm in love with this man,'" Shelly said.

Shelly said that since then, the couple has joked that Jim's singing and musicality brought the two together. Their story comes full circle with the two marrying in the church they first met.

All while being the renowned music director at St. Catherine's, Hughes found time to produce and write most of the

of Faith Formation at the church, has known Hughes for 15 years. He said that in working with him for so long, he has been able to witness firsthand the legacy that Hughes has built.

"He has a special talent for writing music that makes the congregation sing. He's been recognized by many of his peers over the years for that ability," Reilly said.

Jim's passion for music has never wavered but only made him stronger, even in the midst of adversity. As a double amputee, Jim continues to use God and music as an uplifting motivation to keep going.

In 2002, Jim lost his left leg due to a bone infection. Diagnosed with diabetes as a child, Jim said the condition slowed down the healing process, causing the infection to get worse.

In a later accident, while traveling, Jim said he dropped a battery pack on his foot, crushing three of four arteries. In turn, he had to make the difficult decision to amputate his other leg.

"When you lose a limb like this, a lot of people feel like their life is over. This one has been gone for well over 20 years, and it didn't slow me down," Jim said.

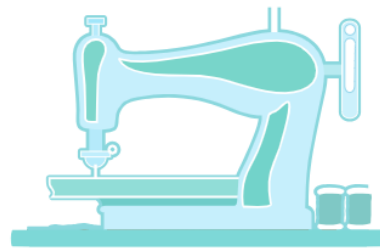
Adapting to his circumstances, Jim said he never gave up. Deacon Larry Hart said he remembered how quickly Jim returned to the church after his amputation.

"A couple of weeks after he lost one of his limbs, he was back at the keyboard singing at mass. It was amazing," Hart said.

Hart said his relationship with Jim left a lasting impact on his life. He said while at St. Catherine's, Jim sang at all three of his daughters' weddings. Hart said Jim leaving will be tough for the church to face.

"It's going to be a void. It will be a gap

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songs performed. Hughes said he has written and produced many albums.

Hughes said that the joy he gets when performing his songs doesn't just come from the music but the reaction that comes with it. He said seeing the congregation sing along to the songs is different and fulfilling, especially for a Catholic church.

Hughes said that traditional Catholic churches are known for not having a lot of singing other than the choir. He said that in the past, because of the Latin language, the congregation couldn't follow along to prayers and songs unless they had a misel in front of them.

"Before 1965, when the mass was in Latin, there was not a lot of involvement. People came to church, but they sat there," Jim said.

However, Hughes and his music ushered in a new style of worship, including singing about social issues that plague the community, such as immigration and racism.

"There was a lot of good music out at that time, but it wasn't as personal as some of the music that has been written in the last 50 years," Jim said.

Vincent Reilly, previously the Director

among our masses because he's been such a strong ... presence. It's sort of like we don't know how good we have it until it's gone," Hart said.

Jim said he hopes retiring will give him more time to travel with his wife. With having loads of responsibility as the music director, Jim said off days for him were sparse. However, with time on his hands, Jim plans to use it in fulfilling ways.

"I would like to be able just to relax and to do some traveling. I have six grandchildren, and three of them live here in the area. To spend more time with them, to watch them grow up. Those are the main things," Jim said.

As Jim lets go of his role, the church will not forget his legacy. And he said he would continue to be grateful for his time there and for the people he has been able to touch, not only as a music director but as a friend.

"I'm going to miss the community. Not just the physical grounds of St. Catherine's, but I'm going to miss the people. Being able to minister to them, to help lead them to have a better spirit-filled life with Christ," Jim said.

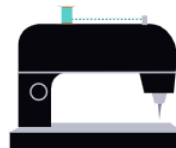
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