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### INSIDE:

- Mamou, La.
- My Three Sons sing the language of love
- Banana nut cake and oatmeal cookie



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Stephen Ditchfield (second from left) joins his sons Nathanael, Michael and David in the barbershop quartet My Three Sons.



# Singing the Language of Love

by CYNTHIA RUBIN

## At the Sarasota Memorial Nursing Home Center

in Sarasota, Fla. (pop. 52,715), an assembled audience of patients slowly but surely perks up, tapping fingers and nodding heads, as a barbershop quartet fills the room with the sounds of old familiar favorites. With the line "Flash, bam—alacazam!" from the song "Orange Colored Sky," wrinkled faces brighten with smiles.

For the vocal group My Three Sons, it's all in a day's work—especially if the day is Valentine's Day. "We hope to bring a smile to someone's face and put a song in their hearts," says Stephen Ditchfield, 53, the head of the Sarasota-based quartet, which has been delivering singing Valentines for nearly 10 years.

The Ditchfields comprise one of the hundreds of barbershop groups coast to coast that "spread the love" with singing Valentines each February, bringing timeless romantic songs to wives, husbands, boyfriends, girlfriends and mothers in performances typically arranged as a Valentine's Day surprise from one sweetheart to another.

"A singing Valentine is a unique and very unusual way of expressing love," says Ed Watson, CEO of the Barbershop Singing Society in Kenosha, Wis., which coordinates singing Valentines each year for groups in its 820 membership chapters across the United States and Canada. "Being serenaded touches some primal

emotion because music has long been the language of love. And barbershop quartets are the modern-day troubadours."

"It takes so little effort for us to affect someone so deeply," says David Ditchfield, 18, who joins his brothers Nathanael, 32, and Michael, 18, alongside their dad in My Three Sons.

Like most barbershop groups, its members have full-time jobs and other responsibilities outside the quartet. Still, throughout the year, they find time to perform regionally at churches, community centers, nursing homes, private parties and barbershop-singing events.

A true American "melting pot" tradition imported by German immigrants, barbershop singing and its distinctive, *a cappella* harmonies took root in minstrel and vaudeville shows during the 1920s, growing into formal, organized singing events in the 1940s and '50s. Its interlocking, four-part structure and happy, feel-good vibes influenced the development of doo-wop music and the sounds of vocally driven pop-rock acts such as the Beach Boys.

"My Three Sons is a wonderful example of the 'greater good' of barbershop harmony singing," Watson says. "They represent the musical art form well with their skill and repertoire, while they further illustrate the family values and bonding opportunities barbershop offers."



The group brings smiles to residents of a Florida nursing home.



"The amount of time I have been able to spend with my dad and my brothers is something I don't think I could have had under any other circumstances," Nathanael says. "On the road, we bond in a way that most families never get a chance to do."

For Stephen, My Three Sons is the realization of a lifelong dream. When he married his wife, Bernice, in 1972, the couple began singing together in a Christian trio. As children arrived one by one, a close-knit family ensemble blossomed.

"My dad and I sang in a couple of quartets when I was a teenager, but when Michael and David started singing, it took us by surprise," Nathanael says. "They were so young—and so good."

After My Three Sons was formed in 1998, the Ditchfields began entering barbershop competitions, eventually winning at the state level and advancing to the prestigious International Quartet Competition in 2004, where they placed among the top 50 quartets in the world.



In 2004, My Three Sons was named one of the top 50 barbershop quartets in the world.

The group loves the competitions, but say winning has never been a driving motivation.

"Expressing love, hope and faith through music is a special privilege we share as a family," Stephen says. "There has never been a greater need for a positive message than there is in our culture today. Valentine's Day is one of those special times of the year when we can help others express their love to the people that are most important to them." ☆

Cynthia Rubin is a writer in Orlando, Fla.

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