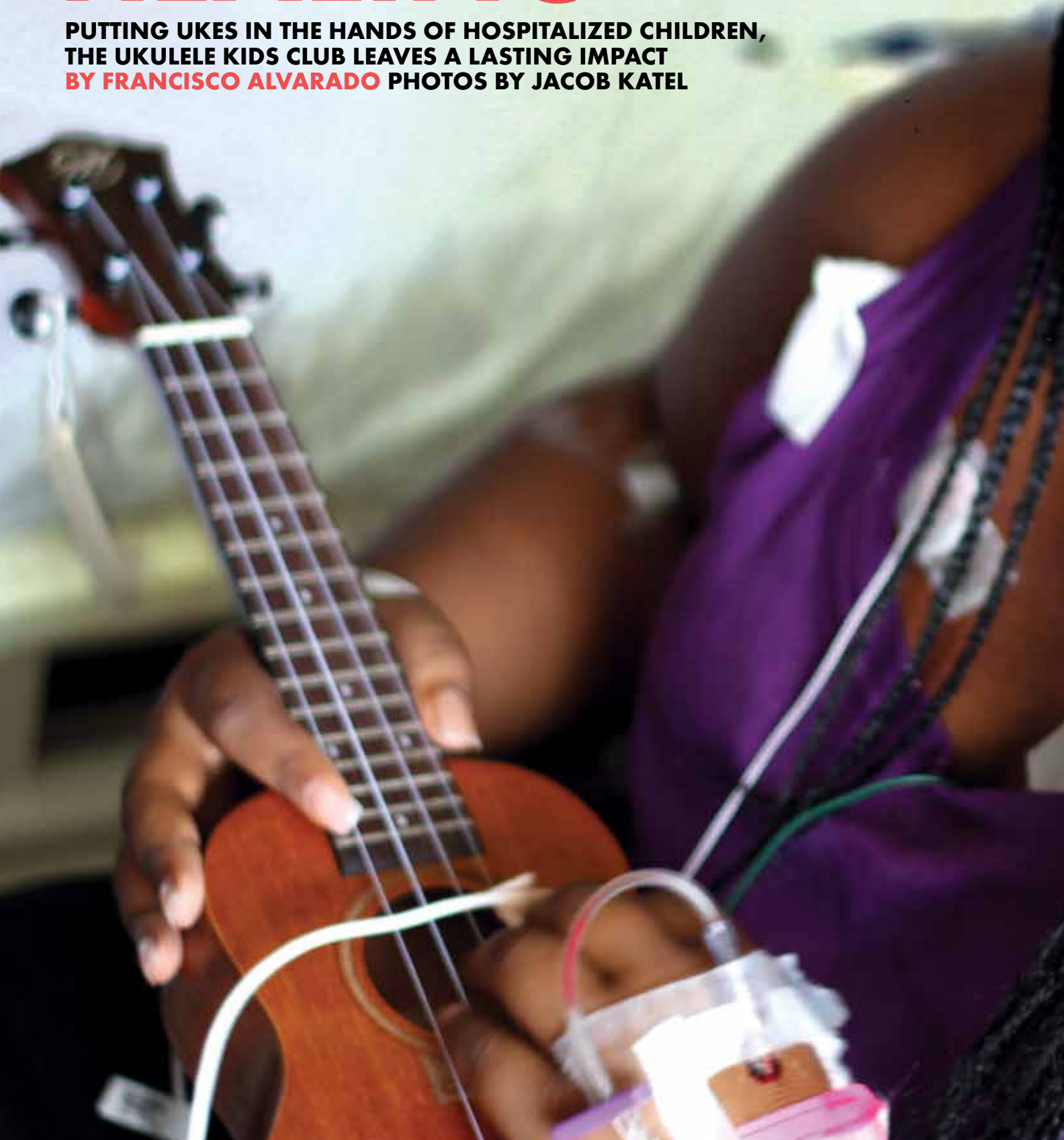


INSTRUMENTAL HEALING

PUTTING UKES IN THE HANDS OF HOSPITALIZED CHILDREN,
THE UKULELE KIDS CLUB LEAVES A LASTING IMPACT
BY FRANCISCO ALVARADO PHOTOS BY JACOB KATEL





A 15-year-old girl named Arabia slouches in a chair inside the pediatric intensive care unit at Chris Evert Children's Hospital in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a heart monitor beeping behind her. When she spies music therapist Mary Brieschke coming down the hallway, Arabia straightens up and flashes a smile. Brieschke is carrying a small, black ukulele case that she presents to the girl.

Like a kid on Christmas morning, Arabia hastily opens the case and pulls out a beautiful, wood ukulele. When Brieschke asks Arabia if she's ever seen a ukulele before, the teen responds, "Only on Mexican TV shows, I think."

"Well, today I'm going to teach you a few basic chords," Brieschke says. "And you'll get to keep this ukulele, so you can continue learning how to play it for as long as you want. Does that sound like something you'd like to do?"

Arabia nods enthusiastically. "I used to play a recorder when I was younger," she says, her black braids bouncing with excitement. "One day, I'd like to learn the piano."

Brieschke pulls out her own ukulele and instructs Arabia to position her fingers on the fretboard to form D, F, and G chords.

"I catch on fast," Arabia beams.

By the time she is transferred out of intensive care the next morning, Arabia and the ukulele are practically inseparable.

"She picked up right where we left off," Brieschke says after paying Arabia a second bedside visit. "I taught her two songs that she can play when she goes home. She was extremely happy."

Four months ago, Chris Evert Children's, along with other hospitals around south Florida, began handing out ukuleles to dozens of sick teenagers and children as a result of one man's mission to give kids with serious illnesses and diseases something to be happy about. Through his nonprofit company, Ukulele Kids Club, Corey Bergman has donated ukuleles to at least 40 hospitals that specialize in pediatric care.

"It's been proven that music has a therapeutic benefit," says Bergman, a 60-year-old New York native with short-cropped hair and a salt-and-pepper beard. "And the uke is really a good tool in medicine."



Laura Cornelius, another music therapist at Chris Evert Children's who works closely with Bergman, says she has definitely seen an emotional improvement among the teenagers and children who have received ukuleles. "We teach our patients coping skills," she says. "Sometimes, we achieve that through giving them and teaching them how to play musical instruments. I had one patient with a long-term, chronic condition who was in a rut. Once we got him a uke, he perked right up."

Bergman says ukuleles can't help but elicit joy. "You can't look at this instrument and not smile or laugh," he says.

A Musician at Heart

Ever since Bergman convinced his parents to buy him his first guitar when he was ten, music has played a central role in his life. "The Beatles had just invaded the United States," he says. "I remember seeing George Harrison holding a guitar on an album cover, and I just thought he was really cool."

Five years later, he formed a rock band with a group of buddies from his neighborhood. After graduating high school, Bergman enrolled at Hofstra University on Long Island. During his college years, he worked on campus as a concert coordinator and then as head of concert security. Bergman was involved in the production of hundreds of performances, including the *In Concert* series tapings for ABC television, the first network rock-concert series of its type.

Bergman spent the next 30 years of his life working in sales, marketing, and management. "We all do what we have to do to make a living," he says. "However, that is the least interesting part about my life. I'm really a musician at heart."

As fate would have it, however, Bergman's return to music would arise out of tragedy. In 2010, his son, Jared, a 20-year-old business major at the University of Rhode Island, was just a few months shy of his graduation. Upon landing in Boston after a trip to Europe, Jared texted his father about having "the time of my life. I saw everything!" He had also picked up what, at the time, seemed like a case of the flu, so Jared told his roommate that he was not feeling well and went to bed early. Sometime during the night, Jared passed away from a viral infection he had

contracted while traveling, leaving behind a terrible emotional chasm for his family and friends. Jared's passing was felt throughout the University of Rhode Island, and more than 400 people, a third of them U.R.I. students, packed the Beth-El Synagogue Center in New Rochelle to express their sorrow.

The Power of the Ukulele

Bergman says that overcoming his grief required a conscious act of will. "When something like that happens," he explains, "you can completely collapse, become bitter and so sorrowful that it takes years to come around. But I decided to do something to honor my son's memory right away."

So, in 2011, Bergman created a memorial fund in his son's name in conjunction with the Make-A-Wish Foundation and volunteered as a wish granter. That year, he raised just shy of \$15,000 for the organization. "Granting a wish brings hope and laughter back into a child's life, even if for a short time," Bergman says.

Charity work helped give Bergman's life renewed focus, and he was soon participating in the creation of scholarships for local high-school and college students. During this time, Corey reunited with members of his original high-school band. At the 40th-year reunion of this band of brothers, the group joined efforts with an ovarian cancer foundation by playing a series of concerts at fundraisers to aid in its cause.

The following year, Bergman closed his business and relocated to Fort Lauderdale to dedicate himself to community service fulltime, specifically working with sick kids. He volunteered at Miami Children's Hospital and Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital. "I would bring my guitar and play it," Bergman says. "Parents would bring kids out of their rooms to hear me play. Since Miami Children's is an area with a large Latino population, I'd play Carlos Santana songs. They loved it."

At Joe DiMaggio Children's, Bergman was allowed to stroll the hallways and strum his guitar. "I was like a wandering minstrel," he says. "As I played the strings, doors would open up, and parents would ask me to come in the rooms. I would just get these fantastic reactions."

Physicians and nurses soon noticed that whenever Bergman played his guitar,

the adolescent patients would calm down and their heart rates would lower. But it wasn't until February 2013 that Bergman discovered the pint-sized power of the ukulele. He met a teenage girl named Sophie who was being treated at Joe DiMaggio Children's. "When I played for her, she reached out to grab the guitar," he says. "But it was too big and cumbersome for her to hold because she had all these tubes attached to her."

When he went home that day, Bergman scrambled into his storage unit and pulled out a ukulele a friend had given him 20 years ago. The next time he saw Sophie, he gave her the instrument. "After that she would always bring it to the hospital when she had to go in for treatment," Bergman says. "That really struck me."

An Idea Takes Root

Bergman and his wife Edda began buying ukuleles at local music stores to give away to the children's hospitals, and within a month, they had donated ukules to more than a dozen children.

To expand their efforts further, they formed Ukulele Kids Club as a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) and started a Facebook

page. Soon a supply of ukules to be given away was found in China. "While a good ukulele retails for about \$100, it only costs us \$40 including the shipping," says Bergman. "The owner of the company found our Facebook page and sent me an email."

The Ukulele Kids Club name is even printed on the headstock.

'There are a minimum of 175 children's hospitals around the country. The need is huge. We are getting requests every day now.'

Andrew Gaskin

A friend, Andrew Gaskin, took on executive director duties and soon realized there was a huge demand for the nonprofit's largesse. "Corey thought if we did just one uke a month, that would be wonderful," Gaskin says. "In the past six months, we've handed out an average of five ukuleles to each hospital we work with."

In August, however, that number jumped dramatically as the foundation donated 75 ukuleles to 15 hospitals in just one month.

Gaskin says he expects the demand to keep going up as Ukulele Kids Club enlists more hospitals. "There are a minimum of 175 children's hospitals around the country," he says. "The need is huge. We are getting requests every day now."

Evelyn Laguardia, Miami Children's music therapist, agrees that the donated ukuleles have made a huge impact in the lives of the kids who receive them. "It gives them a way to cope with what's going on," she says.

Bergman believes the ukulele appeals to children because of its simplicity. "Anybody can hold it and play it. It's easy to learn, and it is the most fun instrument out there. Our goal is to give a uke to every music therapist who calls us up."

With his success thus far, that seems like a real possibility. ■

Learn more about the Ukulele Kids Club at theukc.org.

Left to right

Music therapists Laura Cornelius, Mary Brieschke, founder Corey Bergman, and director Andrew Gaskin.

