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Adamson putting a vibrant tune to community caring

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Tom Adamson, executive director of Cahoots Coffee Cafe, strums a tune on the stage at the front of the Angola cafe, a youth outreach.

Amy Oberlin

ANGOLA — The third day the Rev. Tom Adamson lived in Angola, he found himself on stage in downtown Angola with the Jug Huffers, performing fiddle solos during an 11-minute rendition of “I’ll Fly Away.”

Though he describes himself as “painfully shy,” Adamson is thriving in northeastern Indiana as the pastor of a growing Holy Family Episcopal Church congregation and executive director of Cahoots Coffee Café, a youth outreach.

“This is home,” said Adamson. Holy Family is his first parish and he has embraced the Angola community, along with his wife, Elizabeth, and children Abigail, Samuel, Ezekiel and Joanna.

Tom lends his time and good attitude to countless community enterprises.

Wednesday morning, as the Downtown Angola Coalition's Arts Festival Committee meeting, held at Cahoots, came to a close, Tom jumped up and went to the front of the building for an acoustic guitar. It's one used by young people who gather at the café and want to strum a few notes. The guitar is sometimes out of tune, but it would do, Adamson said, running off to play for the residents of Aperion Care nursing home.

Before being hired as the director of Cahoots, Tom volunteered for a year for its monthly open mic nights. Youth and families have embraced the get together on the first Friday of the month, fostering talent and friendships.

"Music is a means of grace. It's an invisible gift. It's something that all humanity has in common," said Adamson, a South Bend native and third child of 10 siblings who holds a bachelor of fine arts degree from Indiana Wesleyan University. In 2017, he received a master of divinity from University of the South, Sewanee, Tennessee, with an Award for Excellence in Practical Theology.

Adamson was always a standout, earning a full-ride music scholarship to IWU in 1996. He was an accomplished viola player who was tapped for IWU's string quartet and now plays in Trine University's chamber orchestra. He also participated in track and field and was the programming director for the student activities committee at IWU.

But, in reality, he said, he went to college "to find some guys and start a band."

"I had to learn to play guitar first, properly," he added.

With that in mind, he decided, "if I practice my guitar outside, I can meet people."

He found himself underneath some trees near a women's dorm.

"I'm playing and singing. I'm not really good and I can hear windows closing all around me," he recalls. Then a voice yells down, and Tom encouraged the lovely young woman in the window above him to join him in the grass. That was 24 years ago, and Tom has not had eyes for anyone but Elizabeth since.

His college band was M.COTU, an alternative folk rock act with a sound similar to REM. M.COTU had two albums and played the Indiana-Michigan coffee house, university and youth group scene.

"We wanted to be socially aware," said Tom, "not just keep the evangelical machine going."

In 1998, he and a friend co-founded the Spotted Cow Student Music Festival at IWU. It is still an annual event and draws national talent. Tom was honored at the 20th anniversary of the festival in 2018.

He taught music at a studio in Crown Point then at Kankakee Valley School Corp. in Wheatfield and Covenant Christian High School in DeMotte. At Kankakee Valley, he coached middle school track and field, high school Academic Super Bowl and directed pit orchestra for drama club musicals.

In 2009, Tom was hired as a youth pastor at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Valparaiso. He re-established the parish's participation in Vacation Bible School and the city's Popcorn Festival, and recalls mission trips, music performances and summer camps and retreats.

His work and his life have always been intertwined with music.

“I began writing songs as a boy and started to take it really seriously as a high school upperclassman,” Tom said. “This led to a lifelong love of songwriting, recording, playing shows, networking with other artists and bands.”

The most prestigious act Tom played with was in the mid-2000s in Valparaiso — Bottle Rocket Blue. The folksie band had three albums, did several major tours and played festivals and other music markets throughout the Midwest.

That spun off into Tom Adamson and the Texarkana Two, which performed mainly in northwest Indiana and the Chicago area. The group cut two albums and was critically acclaimed, but it also marked the point when Tom realized music would be a hobby and not a career. He continues to perform with his friend Duwayne Ladd in a band formed in 1998, Gypsy Heart. He describes Gypsy Heart as a “permanent side project” blending poetry, spoken word, songs and soundscapes.

Music reaches into the hearts of listeners. Tom, a consummate musician, has acquired the skill of bridging a sometimes awkward gap in getting to know and help everyday people.

“I like myself and I didn’t always like myself,” he said. “That’s my greatest commodity.”

Confirmed as a Roman Catholic in third grade, Tom considers himself an Anglican Catholic and at Holy Family serves in the Northern Indiana Diocese of the Episcopal Church. The congregation has grown and Tom said he tries to encourage parishioners with a positive tone of strength and possibility.

“People are capable of so much more than they think they are,” he said.

Through his connections at the church, he got involved quickly in Steuben County happenings, joining the Pleasant Lake Lions Club with Elten Powers, who invited him to that Jug Huffers concert several years ago in downtown Angola.

“It’s one of the most interesting places I’ve ever lived,” Tom said. He called the city a “melting pot” of personalities that “is realizing its potential.”

He participates in an ecumenical partnership between five local churches that hosts month-long Community Conversations in the fall and a Christmas meal that saw 100 guests at its inaugural event in December.

“I’m a big believer in connecting people,” Tom said. Along with the Downtown Angola Coalition and his church partnerships, Tom belongs to the Steuben County HomeSchoolers, Youth Worker Café, Drug Free Steuben, is on the review panel for Steuben County’s Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative and serves on the board of Faith Community Health Clinic.

“I am very active with the clinic,” said Tom. “I am there every time it is open.” The free clinic is housed on the bottom floor of Holy Family and is generally open the first, third and fourth Wednesday evenings of the month.

Tom takes advantage of the Steuben County Community Foundation’s training sessions. He wants to develop Cahoots’ image in the community along with the cultural and music scenes.

At the drop of a dime, he will pick up a guitar and play.

“Hey!”

Tom turned his full attention to a group of boys surrounding the pool table at Cahoots on a Saturday afternoon. A boy holding a pool stick was looking at Tom.

“I just wanted to know if you knew that Sponge Bob song,” the kid said.

Tom smiled a little, then started to strum.

“Let’s gather ‘round the campfire, and sing our campfire song

Our c-a-m-p-f-i-r-e- s-o-n-g song

And if you don’t think that we can sing it faster then you’re wrong

But it’ll help if you just sing along.”

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