

JOYFUL KEYS LIVING: UKULELE CLASSES BUILD PLAYING SKILLS & FRIENDSHIPS

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Susan Anderson heads up JOY Ukulele. CONTRIBUTED

When Susan Anderson was young, she sneaked into her sister's closet and taught herself to play the guitar. Her older sister, like many older sisters, did not want Anderson to touch her things. But Anderson was infatuated with her sister's guitar. She used a guitar lesson book and stolen time to sit on the floor of her sister's closet and teach herself.

In 2019, Anderson heard about the ukulele group at the JOY Center, taught by Sharon Hulkowski. Her friends had joined and told her how much fun it was. Though she had not played the guitar for a long time, she thought, "I know how to play a string instrument, maybe I could learn the ukulele." She joined the class that became known as Ukulele JOY.

In 2020, during the COVID pandemic, Anderson spent many hours practicing ukulele. Her first ukulele was a soprano, the smallest of the six types. While practicing, she felt that it was too small because her fingers didn't have much room to maneuver. She then tried a concert ukulele, the next size up, with more room to form chords, but has the same tuning as a soprano. During the pandemic, Hulkowski moved away and the class became leaderless.

The JOY Center program director asked Anderson to take over. Like many other organizations, the JOY Center had been conducting Zoom classes, which it still does: Ukulele Joy was the first class to meet live with Anderson as the group's leader, once again playing a soprano ukulele.

"When I was asked to take over the class," Anderson said, "I thought, 'I'm not really a teacher, I'm not really a musician, but leading the class will be a fun challenge.'"

Anderson's goal over the past year has been to encourage members to become less shy so they can share their Ukulele JOY with others. Although practice does increase ability, people at all levels can enjoy belonging to the group. Ukulele JOY offers friendships, time out of the house and an affordable hobby, since the class is free.

"I have noticed that it is easier for me to remember names since I've learned to play the ukulele," Anderson said. "When you learn something, it strengthens connections in your brain." Anderson said our community is full of people her age who do not want to spend all of their leisure time in bars, are on strict budgets and cannot afford events in Miami regularly. They want and need a place to connect with similar people, a place to keep engaged with learning. Anderson smiles as she says, "We may be old, but we are still curious."

It is important the place be a permanent structure, Anderson said, because “It is hard to build a community unless people know where you are.”

You may have heard JOY Ukulele in concert, or been at a flash mob location around town. Check them out on Facebook at Ukulele Notes. If you would like to join the fun, come to the beginner’s class, led by Mike Ehlers; it starts at noon on Wednesdays at St. James the Fisherman Church. Come and join the fun.