

## Father builds “Instrument of Inclusion” for son

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BISHOPVILLE, SC — An "instrument of inclusion" is how a friend of Roy Atkinson's described the washtar.

Atkinson, of Bishopville, invented the washtar — a small, flat guitar that has metal from a washboard in the center rather than strings. He likes to joke that anyone can play it and "it's always in tune."

The washtar was inspired by Atkinson's son Derrick. The father and son duo have a common interest in music. Derrick wanted to learn how to play the guitar like his dad; however, that was going to be a challenge because he only has mobility in his left hand.

### The Accident

At the age of seven, Derrick and his twin brother Stuart were in an automobile accident that left Derrick confined to a wheelchair in 1984. The twins attended Robert E. Lee Academy and rode to school with a teacher who was a neighbor of the Atkinsons.

On a misty morning, her car collided with an 18-wheeler on a straight highway, Atkinson said. Stuart was able to climb out of the car through busted windows. Amazingly, the driver of the truck was a trained EMT.

Derrick was transported to the local hospital, and at the recommendation of a young doctor, he was transferred to McLeod Hospital in Florence, SC. The doctor traveled with EMS and revived Derrick three times from Bishopville to Florence.

On the fifth day in the hospital, Atkinson was told his son would have three hours of life left and that he could spend as much time as he needed with his young son. Nurses began removing medical equipment from the room.

The next morning, the doctor walked into the hospital room and couldn't comprehend how Derrick was alive.

Atkinson told the doctor, "Y'all threw in the towel, yesterday. But, there's another Physician in charge and He would like for you guys to help Him a little bit." Atkinson was referring to God as the Physician.

Atkinson recalled watching his son in a coma for seven weeks. Before the accident, Atkinson married his second wife, Sally, who happened to be a nurse with experience in Intensive Care Units.

Today, Derrick lives in Bishopville in an all-male group home run by the Lee County Disability Special Needs.

Prior to COVID, Atkinson and Derrick would perform at church functions and small groups. Derrick would play the washtar and a harmonica while Atkinson sang and played the guitar. Playing a harmonica helps strengthen Derrick's lungs, which are the weakest part of his body, Atkinson said.

Through it all, Derrick has remained the most positive and encouraging person anyone would hope to meet, his dad said. Atkinson said Derrick inspires him to remain positive and to focus on the good things in life.

"It's almost like he doesn't have any negative, down time. He's positive about everything," Atkinson said. He explained that Derrick has a positive attitude and outlook on life because of his deep Christian faith.

### Building the Washtar

Knowing his son's dream to play music, Atkinson worked to find a way to make it a reality. He tried putting bass strings on a regular guitar to sound like drums.

Then, at a church, he saw a child with special needs who had a regular guitar that had a piece of metal on the front. Atkinson realized that washboard material would work, too.

The first washtar Atkinson made is about the size of a regular guitar and the metal has a herringbone pattern. Over the years, Atkinson has made adjustments to the washtar to make it more universal.

He made them smaller so they are a little larger than a ukulele. Then, instead of washboard metal, he began using the plastic material that covers overhead fluorescent lights. Then, Atkinson added a glove that washtar players wear to protect their fingers.

Atkinson and Derrick went to a musical performance at the opera house in Bishopville. The musician noticed Derrick and began playing

the guitar while Derrick played his washtar. Atkinson said Derrick played so hard that his fingertips began to bleed. That's what inspired Atkinson to make gloves with beads on the fingertips for safer strumming.

Atkinson has a friend who is a carpenter. Atkinson asks him to form the washtar frame based on a sample that is a guide for future washtars. Atkinson then takes the washtars back to his workshop at home. He stains them and adds a polyurethane coating before hanging them up to dry. He then adds the plastic material and wooden pieces that surround the plastic.

He said it takes about an hour to construct five washtars. Recently, he has added a banjo frame to the washtar collection.

#### Roy's music

Atkinson writes music in addition to building washtars. One of his songs is called the "Lizard Man Stomp."

The song is based on a local story about a half-man, half-lizard creature that would sneak around a butterbean field. Thieves were stealing butter beans from a local farmer because he couldn't harvest them all at once. The farmer purchased a costume with reptile feet. He created the Lizard Man character after he dotted the butterbean field with reptile tracks to keep thieves away.

In Atkinson's version of the Lizard Man tale, the creature wanted pieces of chrome off people's cars for his washtar.

The lyrics include: "The Lizard Man has a country band and he plays his scales all over the land...Got a little chrome on the tip of my hand and stroke my scales like a washtar man. "

Atkinson recorded "Lizard Man Stomp" and other songs on a CD that make it easy to strum along to on a washtar.

#### Special Needs community

Seeing a child with special needs play a washtar is a "highlight" of Atkinson's life.

"Those kids, they get [washtars] in their hand — it's almost like they totally feel that they are playing an instrument just as good as anybody. It's just amazing," Atkinson said.

Atkinson said laughing, "They can't do it wrong," pointing out it just takes a little rhythm.

Atkinson doesn't like to charge people for washtars. To see a child's face light up when they are handed a washtar is like a million dollar payment for him.

To learn more about washtars, go to Atkinson's Washtar page on Facebook.

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