

SCSU PRESIDENT

Accordion brings unexpected response from dying mother

By Pam McLoughlin



Contributed photo / Contributed photo

Southern Connecticut State University President Joe Bertolino plays the accordion during a special holiday video to the SCSU community. He chose the song “Flight of the Angels,” which he played for his mom, Eileen, shortly before her death.

NEW HAVEN – Southern Connecticut State University president Joe Bertolino decided in 2019 to resume accordion lessons so he could play for his aging parents, but little did he know how profound that decision would become in his mother’s last days.

At his father’s suggestion, Bertolino, a former New Jersey accordion champion, gave an impromptu performance about a year ago in his family’s New Jersey living room, as his mother, Eileen, lay semi-conscious and “not very lucid,” in the last stages of pancreatic cancer.

When Bertolino started to play of “Flight of the Angels,” – the whole family present, including his husband, father, sister, nephews – Eileen Bertolino started to tap her hand on the railing of the bed, opened her eyes, then sat up and flashed a big smile.

“We were all, ‘there she is.’ It was a powerful and wonderful moment – it was a gift,” Bertolino said, noting it was really the last time his mother interacted with any of the family. “It was a combination of joy and sadness, but still in disbelief about how the music managed to generate a response.”

After the brief awakening Eileen Bertolino returned to sleep, dying about a week later on Feb. 17.

Her widower, president Bertolino’s dad, also named Joe Bertolino, loves that he has video of that moment to watch - and he does.

“It’s a great feeling – it’s like seeing her alive,” the elder Joe Bertolino said. “It’s beautiful – sad, but beautiful.”

Dad Joe Bertolino, a seasoned musician himself, who played trumpet in his band for some 20 years, said he knows the “magic” of music and that’s why he suggested his son play for Eileen Bertolino, as he knew

he had his accordion with him.

The younger Joe Bertolino said the reaction of his mother to music, “brought us peace as a family.”

“Who would have thought?” his taking lessons again would lead to such significance, he said. “Music proved in the end of my mother’s life to provide a joyful and healing experience for all of us.”

The younger Bertolino said he played “Flight of the Angels,” because that was what he was coincidentally working on in his lessons, but it turned out to be apropos, as his dying mother was a person of deep faith – and certainly an angel now.

He said mom grew up in poverty, losing her father at 11-years-old. Eileen Bertolino had five brothers, two of whom were developmentally disabled and became a second mom of sorts.

She was the only one of her siblings to go on to college, but first became a nurse.

“She took care of a lot of people,” including her mother who died a few years ago at age 99 and her disabled brothers. Mom Eileen also tirelessly took care of her daughter who was in a “terrible” car accident in the 1980s, but recovered, the younger Joe Bertolino said.

“She was always a woman of incredible faith,” he said “She was a lovely, kind, caring woman.”

President Bertolino said she instilled three main values, “in this order,” – faith, family, education. The elder Joe Bertolino called his wife, “the rock” of the family and credited her for superb parenting.

Bertolino was a champion accordion player in his youth, beginning at 10 and inspired to play by his maternal grandfather, Gene Wisniewski, who memorably played during the holidays. Wisniewski was married to his maternal grandmother, Marguerite – the one who had been widowed young. While he can certainly play polkas, Joe Bertolino prefers classical pieces, he said.

Bertolino played competitively through college and said he was the only accordionist at University of Scranton. Then life, education, career, put the accordion playing on hold for decades He decided resume playing in 2019 and take lessons, so he could play for his parents as they aged because they had invested so much time and money in that part of his life, he said. There were lessons twice a week, recitals, competition and the younger Joe Bertolino said in 1979 his parents bought him a \$4,000 accordion even though they were regular working-class people. He still plays that instrument.

“They were excited (about the accordion playing) because I was excited,” Bertolino said, noting the accordion “opened doors for him,” in life.

When SCSU president Bertolino decided to take lessons again , he found master teacher Mary Tokarski, with whom he continues to take virtual lessons.

“Joe is a very sensitive person,” said Tokarski, who has performed on the accordion throughout the world. “He brings an awful lot of himself into the music.” Tokarski said because the accordion is held right against the body it has a “quality sound from the heart and, “We become one with the instrument.”

Tokarski isn’t a bit surprised the music had that profound effect on Eileen Bertolino because music “connects with the soul” and “demands a response from the body.”

Tokarski said she's played in many a nursing home and people who haven't spoken in years often start singing.

"The music touches everyone's soul," she said. "Music is an absolutely amazing thing."

At the urging of his staff, president Bertolino played "Flight of the Angels" in his annual video address to the SCSU community, sharing in a general sense that he played the song for his mother shortly before her death.

"Given everything we've all been through (with the pandemic), I wanted to make this personal, I wanted to make this meaningful, joyful," the younger Joe Bertolino said of his annual message. "I thought by playing and sharing my story, it was a way not just to say thank you," but also to send the message "This has been a time when we've had to focus on humanity, on community and these important connections...I hope folks find some joy and peace and beauty in the message."

His video message, performance, garnered a lot of attention and Joe Bertolino heard from people all over the country, and even accepted the invitation to play in the New Haven Symphony Pops holiday concert. He hopes to join a music ensemble at SCSU, which would put him rehearsing right alongside students.

"There's no turning back now," he said. "I think mom would be proud."

• **VIDEO:** See Joe Bertolino play the accordion: <https://youtu.be/1yZQJqKfc3A>