

GRACE NOTES IN A PANDEMIC

Magna's John Peterson has been piping his way through the pandemic, bringing smiles to eight-year-olds holding socially distanced birthday parties and 80-year-olds in assisted-living communities.

Wearing a kilt made from Black Stewart tartan, a Glengarry cap and a sporran – a leather pouch traditionally used by Scottish Highland regiments to hold a day's supply of oatmeal – Peterson brings grace notes and a skirling soundtrack to a difficult situation.

By day, he works at the Magna Exteriors plant in Belvidere, Illinois as an IT manufacturing execution system engineer. At night or on weekends, Peterson plays old and popular bagpipe tunes such as Scotland the Brave and Going Home in parades, on street corners and during memorials to 9/11 victims.

Amazing Grace, a mournful song that is traditionally played at the end of a funeral service by a single piper who walks slowly away as he plays, has been deliberately absent from his repertoire during the pandemic. Happy Birthday, however, is a mainstay.



Peterson picked up the instrument six years ago when he signed up for "Bagpipes 101," a local community college class taught by the City of Rockford Pipe Band. He has since graduated to the band, whose members continue to teach him the finer points of the instrument. During breaks at work he practices by using earplugs and a special electronic unit that emulates the sound of bagpipes.

It is said that the sound of bagpipe music starts a release of memories and emotions that begin the healing process. Peterson simply says the hauntingly beautiful music of the bagpipe is a "nice way to be able to honor and serve people – and boost spirits during COVID-19."

