

# Ukuleles bring connections

*A way to beat the feeling of isolation*

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The popularity of ukuleles on their 139th year anniversary is not going unnoticed by those who see the potential of a member of the musical lute family to draw out and connect persons who sometimes feel isolated.

The miniature instrument with its four plastic strings and short neck and production of four distinct sounds, all wispy and sweet, now has become a therapeutic realm. It doesn't hurt that its popularity is on the uprise after a big dip in popularity for several years and has been so since about 2009. Ukulele sales doubled between 2009 and 2012 and they continue to increase since then. In 2018, approximately 1.77 million ukuleles were sold in the U.S., according to the Statista, a German online portal of statistical databases.

In fact, one of the events at the summer conference of the National Association of Music Merchants, a not-for-profit association, involves a free group ukulele lesson, called "Ukulenny," for participants offered at the Music City Center, Nashville, Tennessee, on July 20. "Instruments supplied; no experience required," according to the event agenda.

The "everyman" instrument, pronounced "oo-ku-lay-lay" by Hawaiians, who introduced the instrument to the United States mainland, is being used as such in the Somerset County Library's workshops incorporating that began the end of last month and continues through the beginning of this month.

"Over the past few years, Somerset County Library has seen an increase in patrons of all ages who are on the autism spectrum," said Cheryl Morgan, library director and administrator of the Somerset County Federated Library System. Some of those patrons have talked with the library's staff about feeling isolated and wanted to be more connected and accepted in the community.

What followed was a partnership between the library and Art Expression Inc., a non-profit organization created in 2001 to promote social and emotional learning and academic enrichment in different settings including libraries, according to Angela Lowden, founder and president of Art Expression Inc. of Pittsburgh.

One of the specialties the organization deals with is called Musical pARTners, a component of music therapy and music appreciation through the "fun to play" and "easy to learn" ukulele that has roots in Hawaiian and Polynesian culture. The instrument originated in Europe and was introduced to Hawaii in 1879 when a Portuguese



Submitted photo  
All that is needed for the  
Musical pARTners Ukulele  
Workshop Series at the  
Somerset County Library.





*Submitted photo waves from behind a pile of ukulele cases and supplies received for the Musical pARTner Ukulele Workshop Series and the library's collection.*



immigrant, Joao Fernandez jumped off a boat and started strumming a ukulele, or jumping flea, and singing. The partnership created a pilot program for both organizations and Art Expression's first venture in Somerset County.

"Music provides unique avenues for individual and group communication, learning and fun," Lowden said. "Instrument play and improvisation help participants increase self-esteem, build confidence and manage frustration."

Morgan believes the workshops will help participants interact and learn with their peers in an inclusive setting with a focus on social and emotional learning through the arts.

Attendees will be introduced to the culture and history of the ukulele and learn basis of playing the ukulele, she said. Participants will be given receive a ukulele, a beginner's ukulele instruction book and their personally-decorated carrying cue to take home with them at the end of the workshop series that involved about 14 members. The library will also be allowed to keep a ukulele on hand at its location.

## It takes two determined organizations and friends

Somerset County Library and Art Expression pooled funding and supplies from multiple sources to bring the Musical pARTners Ukulele Workshop series to Somerset County free of charge to participants, according to Cheryl Morgan, library director.

Art Expression Inc. received \$824 in grant funding from the Earl and Jeanne Berkey Fund and the Sara Fine Davidson Fund of the Community Foundation for the Alleghenies. Donated art supplies came from Blick Art Materials.

Somerset County Library received \$1,000 from the James F. Beener Memorial Fund of the Community Foundation for the Alleghenies, as well as donations from the Somerset Welfare League and the Somerset Fraternal Order of Eagles #1801.

### Where to send the check

For those who want to support Art Expression Inc. and the work it does with students, you can give at <https://www.paypal.com/fundraiser/charity/2769731>. The nonprofit was selected in 2013 and 2017 as a National Arts & Humanities Youth Program Award finalist by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities and its partner agencies.