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Folk concert generates funds, awareness for MCREST

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Concert and comedy will combine for a cause during an upcoming event to support the Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team.

MCREST's fourth annual benefit concert, set for Dec. 3 at the Warren Consolidated Schools Performing Arts Center in Sterling Heights, will feature folk musicians Matt Watroba and Don White playing solo and together, with White's trademark humor thrown in for good measure.

"Especially at this time of year, if (people) can sit together in an audience and laugh and sing and think through music, and at the same time, people will have shelter through the holidays — I think that's a pretty good reason to spend an evening out," said Watroba.

Proceeds will generate funds for the Roseville-based MCREST, a nonprofit that coordinates homeless shelters that shift year-round between 85 partner churches. More than 10,000 volunteers support the organization's efforts, said Sterling Heights resident Tim Joy, a member of MCREST's board of directors and the concert chairman.

Joy said the need is particularly critical considering the dwindling financial support for such services.

"Up until this year, the large majority of the funds have been government funds," he said, "but since those are decreasing, our funding is ever more dependent on individual and corporate donations."

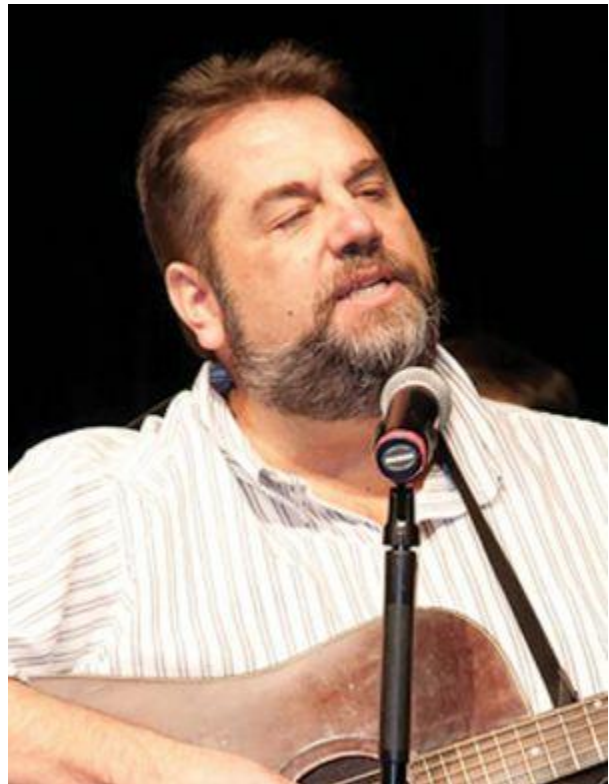


Photo provided
Matt Watroba will take the stage, along with Don White, during a Dec. 3 benefit concert for the Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team.

According to Joy, the demographics of those relying on MCREST have been shifting in conjunction with the economic downturn.

“The individuals that are now seeking shelter are completely different than what we’ve seen in the past,” he said. “The majority that come for help now are single parents with children.”

Years ago, most of those arriving at MCREST were singletons who encountered rough times, and many were grappling with other personal struggles besides joblessness, he said.

Now, “it’s people ... who don’t really have any other problems to address except that they lost their jobs,” said Joy.

He estimates that children now constitute 20-30 percent of the shelter’s 60-person capacity on a regular basis, and MCREST has to turn away 80-100 people each month.

And while MCREST representatives secure lodging for those people in other facilities or hotels, “that just shows you the incredible need right now for homeless shelter. ... I’ve never seen it like this,” said Joy.

With experience in promoting and producing concerts, Joy suggested having one as a means to bolster MCREST financially. Held in 2008 in conjunction with MCREST’s 20th anniversary, the first concert was extremely successful, prompting its establishment as an annual event, he said.

“This is our major fundraiser of the year,” he said. “This is really to try to make up the losses from the government funds that have been cut.”

Organizers specifically opted to book Watroba and White together this year because of their close friendship, said Joy.

For Watroba, the benefit concert is “a little bit of a homecoming.” For more than 20 years, the metro Detroit native hosted “Folks Like Us” on WDET-FM. He recently relocated to Ohio to work as producer/announcer on KSU FolkAlley.com.

He and White, a Massachusetts resident, met 10 years ago through “Folks Like Us” and hit it off.

“What I think is going to make this show really special is that Don and I are just really great friends, and we don’t get to play on the same bill very often,” said Watroba.

Watroba described his own music as “folk and old-time country.” He’s never certain until he arrives exactly what he’ll play, “but what I do is very much — it’s me and my guitar,” he said. “I tell stories behind the songs I sing.”

His original songs include “They Used to Play Baseball Here,” about the neighborhood surrounding old Tiger Stadium, and “The Saint of Warren Avenue,” about his barmaid aunt who

served as a counselor, friend and listening ear to patrons at the Detroit establishments where she worked. Many of those former customers showed up at her funeral to share their recollections, prompting Watroba to pen the song.

“It doesn’t surprise me that my home comes through in some of the songs I write,” he said. “It’s hard to live in a region like southeastern Michigan and not be inspired by what it is.”

White, meanwhile, “is just as much of a comedian as a singer/songwriter,” said Joy. “He’s very fun. Everybody is guaranteed to laugh at this show. A lot of his songs are about relationships and raising children.”

Watroba agreed: “(White) is going to provide the hysterical laughter. I think it’s going to be a good combination.”

Tickets are \$30 for VIP seats (first five rows) or \$20 for regular seats; all seating is reserved. To order in advance, call (586) 415-5101 between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. Tickets also will be available at the door. The concert begins at 8 p.m. The WCS Performing Arts Center is located at 12901 15 Mile, west of Schoenherr, in Sterling Heights.

Besides monetary contributions, MCREST accepts donations of various items for use in the shelters. To view a wish list, visit www.mcrest.org.