

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO.....

Serenade your club every week for a year

Bill Booker, Rotary Club of Little Rock, Ark.

There's a Frank Sinatra song that goes, "Without a song the day would never end/ Without a song the road would never bend/ When things go wrong, a man ain't got a friend without a song."

I quoted that line on my first day as president of the Rotary Club of Little Rock. I explained that throughout my year, we were going to honor music because music adds so much to life. I opened with that quote, then told them that nowhere on earth will you find better music than on Broadway. I was wearing my tux, and I reached down and stuck a phantom mask on before singing "The Music of the Night." I don't want to brag, but I got a standing ovation.

I'm not sure anyone in my club saw this coming. I'm a CPA and a funeral director. It's pretty serious work. But I love live theater, especially musicals. It's my favorite way to escape from reality and forget about whatever else is going on for a few hours.

Every week, I would pick a song and play it over and over and over to memorize the words and tune. I would play the song so much, I was almost sick of it. Then I would get up there, close my eyes, pretend I was in the shower, and start singing. I admire people who really do sing for a living. There were times when I was off-key, but I thought, "What's the worst that could happen? I'll embarrass myself in front of my friends." I had no organ, no piano. But a lot of members would sing along. Some people really got into it. One told me, "Don't do Annie when I'm out of town!"

One of my biggest regrets is that I didn't see anything on Broadway until I was 40 years old. I've since seen 31 shows in New York and more than 100 shows in total. But musicals are my passion. I can tell you how many beads are in the chandelier that shatters onstage during The Phantom of the Opera. I can also tell you how many costume changes there are. I know how many Tony Awards nearly every musical has been nominated for and how many it has won. I learned even more obscure facts about musicals during my year as president of the Little Rock club so I could tell our members a little bit about each production before I sang a song from the show to open our meeting.

I did deviate from the Broadway theme on my wedding anniversary. That Tuesday, my wife attended our meeting with me. I surprised her by having the whole club serenade her with Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline." Her name is Carolyn, and she loves Neil Diamond. She always says he wrote that song for her.

Even though my year as president is over, people now consider me to be some type of Broadway expert. Whenever they see a show anywhere, they'll ask me what I thought about it. I judge whether I really like a show if I want to see it again the next day. I like to buy back-to-back tickets and see a show twice in a row. You really need to see a show four or five times to catch every little thing.

One of my favorite moments is when Jean Valjean is dying at the end of Les Miz and Fantine comes out of the shadows. She sings, "Take my hand, I'll lead you to salvation/ Take my love, for love is everlasting/ And remember the truth that once was spoken: To love another person is to see the face of God."

In my profession, you see that life is full of surprises, and not always good ones. My wife was diagnosed with cancer right after we saw The Lion King for the first time, and that show means more to me now because it was the last musical we saw together before the word cancer came into our lives. The last two funerals I did were for 51-year-old guys. It's important to try to live life to the fullest and enjoy what you love, because every day you have is truly a blessing.