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## **Baptist church member has gift for life**

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By Diane Huber

John Grace uses his sense of touch and hearing to take apart all 10,000 parts in a piano and put them back together.

Blind since birth, he has operated Grace Piano Service in Olympia since 1963. Music is not only a career for Grace - it's also a means to express and experience his faith. "I get my joy and my inspiration knowing that I'm doing the service of God and inspiring someone else that they may feel what I feel when they sing or when they play," he said from his Olympia home, where he lives with his nephew, Lucious Owens.

Grace, 76, is a deacon and one of the founding members of New Life Baptist Church in Lacey. This month, the church will honor Grace as part of its 33rd anniversary celebration. Those who know Grace are invited to attend a banquet Saturday at Saint Martin's University or the special 10 a.m. service Sunday in honor of the anniversary. Both will include a slide show of Grace's life and the church's evolution.

"It's a big, big hullabaloo, and it's a good time for everybody," said Kathy Freda, who is helping coordinate the festivities. Grace played piano at that first service in June of 1975, when about a dozen people gathered at the downtown YWCA to worship. The Rev. Henry Marshall started the church, wanting to establish a place of worship for the small but growing black community. Grace also named New Life. He said the name reflected what the church is all about: "Every time one soul comes to Christ, it is a new life," he said.

Grace has served in a number of church leadership positions at New Life, including minister of music, chairman of the board of deacons and a member of the board of trustees. "He's always been a steady hand," said Deacon Johnnie Majors. "He could motivate the congregation by his songs and by his playing the piano." Grace has seen the church grow from that first service to its first home on Puget Street in 1979. It moved to Pacific Avenue in 1998, when the congregation of more than 300 members had outgrown the Puget Street home. Now the church has about 600 members of all ethnicities and all religious backgrounds, though blacks remain the predominant ethnicity.

Through all of the change and growth, Grace said people still are drawn to New Life for the same reason - to seek Christ. "People go to church for a reason, for something they can feast on," he said.

### **From Georgia to Washington**

Grace grew up on a farm in Georgia, number 13 out of 17 children. He was born blind, but his parents didn't let that excuse Grace from pitching in. "Whatever they taught the children, they taught me to do the same thing," he said. "Whatever chores we had to do, I did them too - farming, planting, harvesting, building different things, repairing different things."

If his parents overheard one of Grace's siblings discouraging Grace, they'd put a stop to it. "Let him do it," they'd say. "I don't want to hear you saying what he can't do." When Grace was 4 or 5 years old, he'd bring water to his family in the fields. His sense of direction was led by the sounds of animals and birds and the direction of the sun.

At 13, he started attending a state boarding school for blind children, where he began piano lessons.

He spent summers home from school in his cousin's shop, where he changed tires, installed transmissions and reupholstered cars.

At 25, he came west to attend Vancouver's Piano Hospital and Training Center - now known as the School of Piano Technology for the Blind. After instructing for several years, he came to Olympia to take over the business of a tuner who was retiring. Grace ran two piano shops in downtown Olympia in the later 20th century, and now he operates his business out of his Olympia home. A garage holds a dozen pianos that he's storing or in the process of repairing, along with tool boxes, saws and other equipment.

His truck quotes two phrases: "The Tuner Alone Preserves the Tone," from an instructor, and "Constant Care Prevents Costly Repair," his own expression.

### **Church grows with community**

When Grace first moved to Olympia, there were six other black people living in the city and people were "standoffish," he said. "They'd meet you and greet you, and that was about it," he said. People didn't want to wait on him in businesses and restaurants, and it was hard to find people who would rent to him. But he was raised not to let discrimination bother him. He said he believed God would provide.

"I grew up in a segregated life, but I was taught to treat people the way you want to be treated," he said. "In life, you have to be able to overcome a variety of obstacles in your pathway." Over the years, the county became more diverse, partly because of the area's affordable home prices and proximity to Fort Lewis. And word spread about New Life.

Grace said New Life helped break down race barriers. Once it became established on Puget Street, the congregation forged relationships with other churches. New Life would host visiting ministers, and New Life's minister was invited to other congregations.

Willard Deruin of Lacey started attending in 1979 after being relocated with the Army to Fort Lewis. "It was small, but warm. You always felt welcome there. ... It's been that way ever since," he said.

### **A natural ability**

Those who know him say it's easy to forget Grace is blind. "I've seen him do stuff sighted people don't attempt to do," Owens said, describing a time he helped his uncle replace a broken door bathroom door with a sliding door. Deruin drove Grace home from church once, and was amazed by his friend's sense of direction.

"John gave me directions right to his front door. ... He'd tell me which way to turn. ... I said, are we sure John is blind?" he said. Grace is matter-of-fact about his technical dexterity. "I'm a curious person. I like to observe things, how it comes together, how it comes apart, would I be able to put it together," he said. His independence and can-do attitude make him an inspiration.

"The skills he has, watching him work, it's encouraging," Owens said. "He's inspired me to do different things and try different things in life." Majors added: "He's independent and not one that would feel sorry about himself. I feel like he can do anything anyone else can do," he said. Freda said Grace has been a well-loved fixture in the church. "We adore him. He loves the Lord so much. ... He's just an amazing man. Being blind doesn't mean anything to him in terms of hindrances. It's not even a hardship to him."

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