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# News Today

An on-line newsletter for ODJFS employees  
**Thursday, August 2, 2007**

**Carmen Elena Barreiro will perform on Tuesday, September 25 at the Barnes and Noble Bookstore in Westlake at 7 p.m.**



## **Venezuelan harpist keeps her music alive**

Not many people know that the traditional harp is the national instrument of Venezuela. Cuyahoga County employee Carmen Elena Barreiro is one of the people that does. In her native country of Venezuela, Barreiro was actually known as "The Queen of the Harp."

Barreiro, who has worked in Public Communications for Employment and Family Services in Cuyahoga County since April, has lived in Ohio since October. That was when she and her husband moved to the Cleveland area from San Diego.

The Latin-American harpist grew up

performing throughout Latin America, Europe, the Caribbean and The United States with her family musical group named *Los Hijos de la Casa Grande* (The Children of the Big House). As the only girl in a family of five children, she made a name for herself performing and touring with her parents and siblings.

Carmen Elena was the harpist and her brothers Julio, Paco, and Freddy played bass, cuatro, and maracas, respectively. Carmen's mother, Thaydee, joined as a singer, and the 1½ year-old son Gabrielle as a multitalented dancer-singer-percussionist. They played an eclectic mix of traditional music and popular songs. Soon they started playing regularly on

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national TV and touring all around Venezuela. The group also toured outside of Venezuela and they even played in “The Hispanic Heritage Festival” in Miami, and “The Walt Disney World Tenth Anniversary Celebration” in Orlando. They played for 12 years, until the group finally dissolved so the five siblings could pursue their professional careers. Barreiro graduated in International Studies at the Central University of Venezuela.

Most Venezuelan harpists are men. Carmen is one of the few exceptions. She started playing the Venezuelan harp when she was 13 years old and soon her father, Julio Manuel, realized her talent.

Her father fell in love with Venezuelan music after he immigrated there from Spain when he was 20.

“He was inspired and thought maybe in the future some of his children would play Venezuelan music,” Barreiro said.

Although she liked the instrument immediately, “It was very difficult to learn,” she said. “There are so many strings, and when you hit the strings, it’s so painful on your fingertips.”

A teacher from her elementary school offered to instruct her and she studied basic music for two years. As she developed her musical career, she began taking master classes from harpists in Venezuela.

After graduating from the Central University of Venezuela with a Bachelor’s Degree in International Studies, she moved to Philadelphia in 1997 to study with a Celtic harpist. Barreiro was inspired to learn Irish music because of her father’s Celtic heritage. It was there she met her husband, whom she married a year later.

“I play Celtic music with my Venezuelan harp,” she said. “The sound is so unique and different.”

In 2001, she and her husband moved to San Diego to further their careers.

“Venezuelan music can be traced back to European and African cultures,” Barreiro said. “African music and Venezuelan music, they are both the same and their sweet dialogue reveals compatibility. I adopted the rippling style of the kora (West African

harp-lute) and used African-style repetition to emphasize rhythms.”

“I practice every day,” she said. “When I play, in my mind comes back all the memories of playing with my family. Every year I visit them at Christmas and we all still play together.”

Her first solo CD, “Solo Arpa,” was released in August 2004. Barreiro describes Venezuelan music as a mixture of innovation and improvisation. The music is learned by ear, players don’t read music. Half of the pieces in the CD are *joropos* (a cheerful rhythm danced by the cowboys from the plains of Venezuela and Colombia) or *pasajes* (a kind of slow joropo). “The Arrival of the Queen” is a *pasaje-joropo* composed by Barreiro inspired in Handel’s “The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba.” In addition she plays a bolero from Mexico, and traditional music from Bolivia and Paraguay. Jumping to Europe, Barreiro interprets Anonymous Romance from Spain. In a radical change of style and instrument, Carmen Elena plays three Irish traditional tunes on her Irish harp. Finally, the famous Prelude BWV 846a by Bach is played on the Venezuelan harp, where its unique sound gives new life to this composition.

“I can play along with any music really,” Barreiro said. “The secret is improvisation. I have a mental bank of hundreds of melodies and rhythms, and always improvise.”

Barreiro will be performing next at her “Latin Harp Concert” at Barnes & Noble Bookstore at Crocker Park in Westlake on Tuesday, September 25 at 7 p.m. She currently plays around the Cleveland area at weddings, fundraisers, cultural events, and receptions.

For more information and samples from both of Barreiro’s CD’s visit: [www.carmenbarreiro.com](http://www.carmenbarreiro.com)

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