C.J. Dupuis uses music to stay young

by Blair Dahl

Let me tell you about an old wives tale that is true: if you pull a tooth out as soon as it gets loose, your teeth will grow in straight. My personal proof is my first son: let his teeth fall out slowly, never wiggling them too hard or pulling one out prematurely. He is in braces now. My next son decided free money was a good thing, and as soon as a tooth was loose, it was under the pillow. And, you guessed it, he won't be needing braces.

C. J. Dupuis, a musician from Vatican, told me this old-time belief. He said he remembers being out in the field, playing near the wagon as others worked. When his tooth loosened, his father came over and said, "Let me take a look." With that and a quick yank, the tooth was out. C.J. is 85 with all original and, yes, straight teeth.

C. J. (as his friends call him) was born in Acadia Parish. He went to school in Rayne near his home and family farm. He did not finish school until he was 20, due to the fact that he, like many others, had to help farm. Also, like many others, he did not learn English until he was in school.

"I did not really begin to learn English well until I was around thirteen," he admitted. C.J., like his peers, spoke French at home but English at school. When he was a teenager, his father took a job as a custodian at the school in Mire where he finished high school and met his future wife, Alma, at a dance there.

After high school, World War II took C.J. away to France as a translator for the Air Force. "When we were in school, they [the educational system] didn't want us to speak French, only English," he explained, "but in the War, it really paid off that I knew French."

Upon his return home, he and Alma set up housekeeping in New Orleans. C.J. worked at the Monteleone Hotel as a bellboy and his friendly ways made him many friends, but city life was not the life for a boy from the country. It was a job with Tom's Peanuts and Candies that brought him back to his beloved Acadiana.

For 12 years, he sold peanuts, candy, chips, and crackers to sometimes 70 customers a day. He was always one of the top 10 salesmen of the year. Even today, he can still name most of the little places he stopped to restock the shelves. But that much work takes you from your family, so he went to work for the Orkin Pest Control Company. C.J. had 26 years of accident-free driving for Orkin, and he wears an engraved ring to prove it. After treating a home, he would always say, "Courage and patience," before he walked out the door. It brought a smile every time.

In Vatican, C.J. and Sis (his wife Alma) settled down to raise two sons, Kenny and Keith. This simple life, easily told, was not without ups and downs. Inside this simple life is a symphony, one borne of the music C.J. so loves. He is a Cajun musician.

C.J. was surrounded by music as a child. His father played the accordion. His brother played the fiddle. It was natural for C.J. to pick up an instrument, which he did at 8 years old. The musician plays by ear and has never read music. But, he'll tell you, "It don't matter because I can't see to play either!" Glaucoma has taken 90 percent of his sight.

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C.J. Dupuis plays his fiddle at Parc Sans Souci in Lafayette in this undated photo.

(Submitted Photo)
C.J. Dupuis, 85, plays his accordion at a Christmas gathering.
(BNP/Blair Dahl Photo)

Music has been with him all of his life, despite his wife's apparent lack of musical ability. "She didn't even know how to whistle!" C.J. related with laughter.

But his beloved Alma encouraged her husband to pass the tradition to their children, and he did. Kenny, the oldest, plays the guitar, and Keith plays the accordion and drums. Keith even has a band in Houston where he lives. Like his sons, C.J. has many talents. He plays the accordion and can tell you all about them and how they work. He plays the fiddle and even has a miniature one made by his brother. To the envy of others, he plays the spoons effortlessly.

C.J. said he made extra money throughout the years by playing the music he loves with bands on the weekends. Many locals have seen the Saturday afternoon dance show broadcast from Randol's. They might have seen, as I have, a younger C.J. playing the fiddle with a fine Cajun band, and they would have been mesmerized as the dancers floated by. From their living rooms, they'd be invited into the party by a fiddle-player who holds all the other instruments in the band together and pulls the dancers in their rhythms around the floor.

C.J. played along with bands in Opelousas, New Orleans and even Tampa, Fla. Later, he had his own band, "CJ and the Vaticajuns," who played at Little Toby's in Opelousas for many years.

"One of the reasons people may enjoy my music is that I have incorporated English songs in with the classic French," said C.J. about his success. "I have even added a few country tunes."

This makes his music singable and recognizable to a broader audience.

In 2005, after 62 years of marriage, his beloved Alma died, and this became one of C.J.'s lowest points in his life. But ever optimistic, he keeps friends and family close by. On his own now, C.J. continues to be active. He has friends who play in the area, and they invite him to join in when he can. He played at Parc San Souci a year or two ago.

Last August, he performed in Pennsylvania to help raise money for hurricane relief efforts. A group in Mt. Pleasant, Penn., came right after the hur-
ricanes to help with clean-up in 2005. So, in 2006, to help earn money to pay for a return trip, the group thought a night of Cajun music would help them to continue their efforts. C.J. made friends and memories to last for years to come.

"I felt like Elvis with all the fuss they made over me," he said about the Pennsylvania audiences' response to him. "I do not understand why they treated me like I was a celebrity."

You see, this gentleman who so accurately lives the image of the Cajun musician, with his honesty, humility and humor, shares his gifts anytime. He plays for my kids every time we visit. My daughter takes off her shoes and gets ready to dance almost as soon as we walk in the door. He comes to my house and plays for my company. My son (the one who listened to C.J.'s financial advice about teeth) enjoys being the one to help him with his instruments. And if my oldest son learns a song on his guitar, C.J. will pick up his fiddle and play along with encouragement and patience.

Even though he can hardly see, driving him anywhere is an exacting history lesson. Not long ago, we came to a stop, and I let out a gasp. Before I said a word, he asked, "You saw the deer?" because sure enough, to our right, was a fenced in area with deer...big deer. He knows when we pass the water well in Mire, and he can tell you how far the water reaches in the parish. He will spontaneously point to a house and tell you who lives there and how the owners are related to him. He is better than MapQuest because he even tells me when we are approaching a turn in the road or about to go over a bridge—all without the benefit of sight. He visits his one surviving sister in the nursing home, and they converse in French about their lives now and as they used to be. They laugh that he is old but she is 10 years his senior! You cannot leave him without hearing a joke or funny story.

His enjoyment of and gratitude for life is contagious. He is continually and genuinely amazed at the people who help him. Obviously, he forgets that one of the requirements of a true southerner is that work stops for enjoyable company. And in true Cajun style, despite his loss of sight, he counts his blessings. And he is so proud of his rosary that is blessed by the Pope.

Of my many blessings, one of the greatest is knowing C.J.

"I talk too much, I know," he often tells me.

But that gift of gab has turned him into the musician—storyteller that his friends realize is a treasure. I don't have to do the "tourist thing" to get a true taste of Cajun culture. I sit down with a friend and just listen and enjoy. A jewel sits amongst you...with very straight teeth.