Gerald Kolpan captures a harpist for the Lyra Society. RANDI FAIR / Staff Photographer

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Gerald Kolpan's new project lets nonprofits smile for the camera

Victoria Mier For The Inquirer

'Just a little more to the left," Gerald Kolpan said.

Harpist Elizabeth Hainen inched closer to the window.

"There," Kolpan said, rushing back to his camera. After looking through his viewfinder - Hainen just left of center, haloed in golden light - Kolpan exclaimed, "Ahh, poetry, pure poetry."

Hainen beamed, relieved. For five minutes, Kolpan had been moving the Lyra Society's founder around the cramped quarters of the Curtis Institute's harp studio.

Perfection seems to be Kolpan's thing - or, at least, part of his goal with the Philo Project. A retired television reporter, Kolpan founded Philo in 2012 to create free videos for small nonprofits in the Philadelphia area. High-quality videos are integral to raising awareness
and attracting donors, according to Kolpan, but smaller organizations can't always afford them - such as the Lyra Society, a nonprofit raising awareness of the harp as a solo instrument and providing musical education, with a yearly budget well under $1 million. Tucked away into a corner, the studio barely has enough room for the harps, let alone students and Kolpan's equipment.

"We'll be videotaping you today," Kolpan said to the group of harpists, most of them young women. "But just forget we're here. Have fun and do what you always do." Kolpan has a knack for making people feel comfortable, even when he's got a camera four inches from their face.

"I'm a little nervous," said Lyra student Emma Paige Clayton, 12. "But I think we're going to get a lot out of it, because a lot of people know the harp exists, but they've never played it. Maybe with a video, people would more interested in playing."

A professional video, free of charge, is "the perfect thing we didn't even know we needed," said Elizabeth Steiner, artistic coordinator at Lyra.

Elizabeth Huston, a teacher at Play On Philly!, a program Hainen sponsors, said that for programs such as Lyra or Play On Philly! (a music-education program), it can be hard to demonstrate concrete results. But what you can show are the programs at work. "How can you tell them you've changed a kid's life?" Huston said. "I think with a video, people might, at least, be more interested."

Kolpan first dreamed up Philo after offering to volunteer at Mighty Writers, an after-school program that teaches students to think and write critically. Tim Whitaker, executive director and founder of Mighty Writers, told Kolpan the best thing he could do was make a video. So Kolpan did, with a budget of nothing and a time schedule of also zilch.

"Gerald is a real pro. It was really well-done, and it was done in a short order," Whitaker said. "It's a service that's hard to come by."

When Kolpan walked to Mighty Writers, flash drive in hand to deliver the final product, he thought about how much fun he had creating the video - and that maybe, it was exactly what he should be doing every day.

Whitaker "said to me, 'You know, everybody who comes in here will say they're going to do a nonprofit of their own, but you're the only one who actually did it,' " Kolpan said, "which I think implied, 'You're the only one crazy enough [to do it].' "

Philo is a new nonprofit, and Kolpan said finding funding can be difficult. The project has received grants from organizations such as Philadelphia Cultural Trust, a group that works to promote and preserve the arts within the city. As part of CultureTrust, Philo also receives affordable back-office assistance, intended to help nonprofits trim costs and expand. But Kolpan has also put his own funds into Philo - and hasn't taken a salary yet. Jessica Craft, founder and executive director of music-ed organization Rock to the Future, said Philo's video is a quick, visual tool that tells a succinct story.
"It was incredible that it didn't cost us anything," said Craft, who uses the video to introduce new volunteers or potential donors to the nonprofit's mission, as well as to generate more interest.

Philo's services are vital, according to both Craft and Justin Trezza, executive director of the Norris Square Neighborhood project, an arts and gardening organization for young people in West Philadelphia.

Trezza said Kolpan created not only a work of art that captured the spirit of the square and the kids who love it - even returning twice to reshoot footage he was not satisfied with - but also a professional product that nonprofits with limited resources can continually use, year after year.

For the Lyra Society, Philo's finished product should convey that Lyra is bringing a "very special instrument to kids," Steiner said. "And the kids are equally special, but wouldn't have the chance to play the harp necessarily. We want to convey the commitment of the students, the teachers who work with them during weekly lessons, and the schools helping Lyra."

There's no formula for a Philo video, Kolpan says: "They're all different, but the most important thing to do is listen very closely to the client to find out what's really important to them."

Kolpan is usually the one doing all the listening - and the interviewing, filming, editing, and paperwork. As a fairly new nonprofit, Philo remains a one-man effort. Which means Kolpan seems pretty happy to spend retirement not really being retired at all.

"I've been very lucky," Kolpan said. "And Philo is my chance to share some of the good luck I've had in my life." He paused, one eyebrow raised a fraction of a centimeter, before bursting into laughter. "How do I say this without being corny? I want to do something good for somebody else."

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