

Finding a Home for a Man and his Piano

WGCU | By [Julie Glenn](#)

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Julie Glenn

Justin Willis listens as Zbigniew Szymczak (Ziggy) plays piano in his new home

An elderly Polish man living in Southwest Florida faced homelessness when his trailer park sold, but thanks to a community of expats and caring people, the piano player named Ziggy has a new place to call his own.

Zbigniew Szymczak, who goes by the name Ziggy, is settling into his new 900 square foot trailer after making a move he hadn't planned to make. The land beneath his prior home sold, and all of the trailers at the Myakka River Trailer Park were either moved or being demolished. His was among the last standing.

"They would come and tell him they were demolishing it, and Ziggy has the onsets of dementia. So sometimes he forgets what you tell him in the moment. And besides that he speaks very little English," said Justin Willis , who heard about Ziggy's plight through a reporter friend. Willis works for [Care Patrol](#).

"We are a senior placement organization. We help families that are looking for assisted living, independent living, and memory care," Willis said.

With no known family in the U.S., Willis decided to take on Ziggy's heartbreaking case because he said, "Every day (he) was waking up and starting over again. And every day he was walking out of his trailer seeing this nightmare of a mess and remembering, 'Oh crap that's right, I'm going to have to leave here.' Well, at 87 years old with no electric, no running water, no working phone, who's he supposed to turn to?"



Willis is also a Certified Dementia Practitioner so he could see what was happening and figured out how to communicate with the old man who'd forgotten the English he'd once understood fluently. He looked at Ziggy's options and found only rentals Ziggy couldn't afford. The cheapest being 130% of Ziggy's monthly income. So he set his sights on buying another trailer outright. He found one for \$22,000 right down the street from his old place. Justin says the rental issue is a problem many seniors face. He says a rental would wind up costing Ziggy up to \$300,000 over the course of ten years and he'd still have nothing.

"What about five years from now, three years from now, ten years from now? What do we do then? And that's what we're not thinking about. But if we look at long term sustainability through ownership, that would make a tremendous difference," Willis said.

So Willis set about raising the money to get the modest \$22,000 trailer. The owners of Old World Restaurant, like Ziggy, fled communist Poland. They hosted a fund raiser. Ziggy played piano for the entertainment.



Julie Glenn

Christine and Theresa from the Old World Restaurant bring pierogis and stuffed cabbage for Ziggy

They often bring over pierogies and stuffed cabbage for Ziggy and help translate. They're here to help with our interview, but Ziggy prefers to speak with the piano. After shaving and changing his outfit three times, he finally emerges and heads straight for his familiar piano bench.

After a song, we chat, with the help of our translators.

Ziggy's Story

Ziggy was born around the time Democracy died in Poland. The Stalinist communism that replaced it after World War II repressed any positive talk of Americans- something his father indulged in regularly as he credits Americans with saving his life when he was



A photo of Ziggy's family in Poland is featured decor in his new home

Ziggy spent some of his earliest years in a prison camp, and one day while in school, soldiers busted into his classroom and called Ziggy's father a criminal. Later, he was arrested and jailed.

Translator: "He spent eleven years in jail, his father. When he saw him after seven years his father didn't recognize him."

He went on to study engineering in college, and on the advice of a professor, he learned to play the piano. He and some friends had a group called the Jolly Boys, but they weren't allowed to play American music. Still, that American Dream kept calling. He left Communist Poland in the late 60's.

"He came in through New York, lived in Manhattan, played the piano all over New York City and traveled all over the world before that, playing the piano."

He remembers playing at the White House and for Queen Elizabeth. One year, he went to play in Key West for a season and stayed for seven years, eventually moving to his old trailer in North Port in the 1980's.

“So to take a man who had been through so much, then the war of Poland, communism, then coming to America and thinking he was going to have this great life, to losing his trailer and not even remembering what was happening. What could we do other than to step up for him and make sure he was going to be alright?” said Willis.

Justin Willis spent all of his non-working hours raising enough money for Ziggy's trailer and a year's rent. He set up a GoFundMe campaign, arranged the benefit Ziggy played at the Old World Restaurant, and secured a donation from the developer who bought the land under Ziggy's old place.

“Right now when I watch him play and he looks over at us with his half grin smile on his face, and it just makes your heart happy. It makes you feel like, you know what? This makes it all worth it,” Willis said.



The owners of Old World Restaurant bought a piano for their place so now Ziggy has a standing gig to play on Sundays.

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Julie Glenn

Julie Glenn is the News Director and the host of Gulf Coast Live. She joined the WGCU team in November of 2016 to expand the Gulf Coast Live call-in radio show from once a week to five days a week. Since then, the show has been recognized in state and regional competitions and has featured artists, political leaders, historians, environmental experts, doctors, local reporters, and national and international scholars. After leading the station's award-winning coverage of Hurricane Irma in September of 2017, Julie was named Interim News Director. In January of 2018, she launched WGCU's first podcast: Grape Minds.

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