

# A Tale Of Two Cities Called Bangor As Jeffrey's Family History Comes Full Circle

By Ceidiog Hughes

**BANGOR** - An American opera singer who's on a musical journey to reconnect with his Welsh roots performed at a care home after his family history came full circle.

Dr Jeffrey Williams, who was raised in **Bangor Pennsylvania USA**, is now on a four-month sabbatical at Bangor University in Gwynedd.

His great great grand-grandfather, Evan Roberts, emigrated from the slate town of Blaenau Ffestiniog in 1868 and a year later married fellow North Walian, Laura Roberts (née Griffith), in New York before settling in the American Bangor where they were a prominent and respected family.

According to Jeffrey, coming to North Wales was an emotional pilgrimage and he is hoping to trace some long lost relatives as well as researching at Bangor University and around the rest of the country.

The experience will see him take an intensive 10 hours a week course in the Welsh language, give lectures, undertake important research into Welsh music and culture, and perform at local venues.

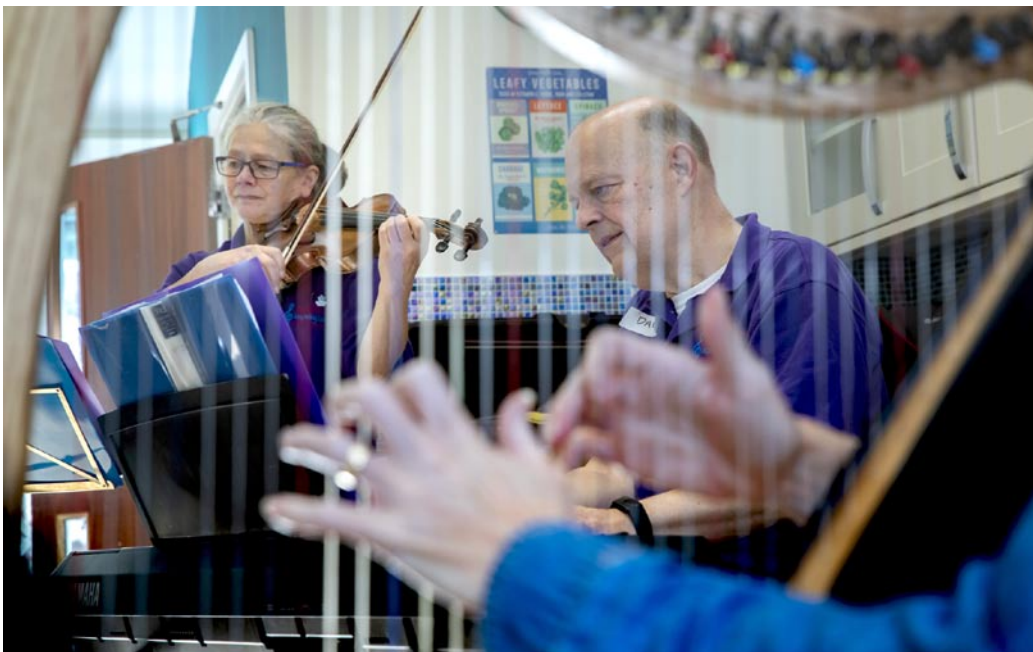
Residents at the Pendine Park care organisation in Wrexham were delighted when they became one of the first Welsh audiences of the talented vocalist.

Jeffrey was accompanied by Pendine Musician in Residence Nia Davies Williams, who is based at the Pendine's Bryn Seiont Newydd dementia care centre in Caernarfon.

An accomplished harpist, Nia is coincidentally a graduate of Bangor University and a leading authority on the use of music in the care of people living with dementia.

The verdict was a resounding thumbs up after he delivered popular songs from classic musicals including Irving Berlin's *Lazy* and *This Nearly Was Mine* from *South Pacific*.

Jeffrey also joined Hallé orchestra cellist David Petri and violinist Caroline Abbott who were conducting a music session as part of a long-running community outreach project at Pendine.



**Jeffrey Williams** who is an Associate Professor of Voice at Austin Peay State University, Grew up in Bangor Pa.

As a child, Jeffrey, 38, had always been aware there was a city in Wales called Bangor because he grew up in its American namesake where he lived with his parents Tom and Sue Williams, and his brother Scott.

He said: "Growing up, Wales was always at the back of my consciousness as I knew my descendants came from this part of the world and our name, Williams, of course is about as Welsh as it gets.

"For a long time I wondered how different the two Bangors might be and now I'm ecstatic to be here to see for myself."

Neither of his parents nor his brother are musically inclined but Jeff thinks he might have inherited the music gene from another great-grandfather, Thomas R Williams, who used to compose vocal music and hymns.

Both his parents, Charles and Elinor Williams, were born in Wales – Jeffrey is not sure where - as were two of his older brothers but Thomas and the couple's three other children were born in America.

He said: "I know Thomas was part of a large family so I'm hoping there must be some descendants still living here in North Wales. It would be great to find out more while I'm here and maybe even make contact with long lost branches of the family."

For the period of this visit, he is on sabbatical from his role as Associate Professor of Voice at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, Tennessee.

Jeffrey is also a well-known operatic performer in Tennessee, having sung

with the Nashville Opera, the Nashville Symphony Orchestra and the Gateway Chamber Orchestra.

He appears on three world-premiere recordings, Thomas Sleeper's series of mini-operas *Einstein's Inconsistency* and Michael Dellaira's *The Death of Webern*, and Heinrich Marschner: *Songs for Baritone*.

He aims to delve further into the history and culture of Welsh art song with a view to publishing his research.

Jeffrey said: "Everyone has been hugely welcoming and it's fantastic to finally see Bangor, Wales. It has me completely entranced."

Pendine Park Artist in Residence Sarah Edwards asked Jeffrey to join the music session after meeting him at the North Wales International Music Festival in St Asaph, of which Pendine was the headline sponsor via the Pendine Arts and Community Trust.

Sarah said: "Jeffrey was such a pleasure to talk to and his enthusiasm for Welsh music so clearly obvious that it just made sense to invite him here to meet our residents and share the love which we all have for music in Wales. To hear his fabulous baritone voice was a delight and all the residents gave him a great welcome."

While in the region Jeffrey plans to give a recital at Bangor Cathedral and perform as a soloist with the Bangor University Symphony Orchestra.

He has upcoming trips planned to Cardiff and Edinburgh and is looking forward to a visit in November by his husband Kevin Jablonski, who plays double bass with the Nashville Symphony Orchestra.

Jeffrey said: "I can't wait for him to see how wonderful Wales is, show him around historic Bangor, and share with him all the great sights of North Wales."