



## Music therapy comforts patients, provides connections

By Jennifer Rink

Music is a powerful medium. Chances are you have memories set to music: the first dance at your wedding, lullabies sung to you as a child, religious music that spoke to your spirit.

Now imagine your day-to-day memory is fading. Would the soundtrack to your life still be rooted in your memory? Would the simple strum of a chord take you back to those memories, allowing you to remember the things that are so important?

For patients in a hospice or palliative care setting, music therapy may be a way to bring peace and comfort to someone who is otherwise non-responsive. It could also just give a patient experiencing pain or sleeplessness a way to relax.

DeKalb County Hospice began a pilot music therapy program in July, 2008. The response has been so positive the agency made the program full-time and hired music therapist, Jen Jencks Conley, to head it.

Conley is a board-certified music therapist who previously

practiced music therapy in hospice and geriatric settings. Nationwide, only 4,000 music therapists have attained the Music

Therapist–Board Certified (MT-BC) credential, and these therapists participate in a recertification program to maintain and grow their expertise in music therapy.

Conley also is a Licensed Professional Counselor. Before working as a music therapist, she worked in the fields of counseling, social work and music ministry.

A growing body of research shows music has a physical effect on the body in many ways. It can help lower blood pressure and heart rate, relieve stress or anxiety, and reduce sleeplessness.

Specifically, entrainment is a technique that pairs the tempo of the music to the rate of respiration, or breathing. As the tempo of the music slows, so does the rate of respiration. Also, if an oxygen machine or other type of monitor is being used the therapist can incorporate those noises into the music as well.

Mentally, music is a great way to increase communication between patients and their family or caregivers. For patients who can no longer communicate in a verbal manner, music can encourage a non-verbal way to express feelings and emotions to loved ones. Medical research also shows that the portion of the brain that

responds to music is among the last affected by Alzheimer's disease or other neurological diseases.

Conley describes music therapy as using music to reach a non-musical goal. With hospice patients, music therapists use music that is meaningful to each individual patient to soothe and relax, or to promote connections with family.

John Peterson's mother, Millie, suffered from Alzheimer's disease for more than six years. In October, 2008, Millie's health began deteriorating rapidly. She moved into Oak Crest Retirement Center, and was losing her memory quickly. She had no recollection of the years since her marriage, but had some memory of her childhood, although those memories were fading fast.

"She knew there were things she should remember. It was frustrating for her," Peterson said. "Her world was closing in on her."

Music was just about the only thing Millie could enjoy. Music or a cup of coffee, her son recalled.

"She didn't know who was talking to her and she couldn't understand words, but the music was peaceful and relaxing," he said.

Conley's relationship with Millie Peterson was comforting to her family as well. John Peterson knows the closeness was reciprocated by his mother as much as she could.

"Our family was brought peace knowing that Mom was peaceful," Peterson said. "It was a real blessing."

Karen Hagen, executive director of DeKalb County Hospice, is thrilled to offer this wonderful experience to patients and families.

"I have always felt that music has a powerful effect on all of us," she said.

"We started slowly in June, 2008, with seed money from local foundations. All of us at Hospice knew right away we needed Jen (Conley) to be full-time and that there are no limits to the expansion of the program."

Hagen said the DeKalb County Hospice Board of Directors has been very supportive of the program, realizing how important this service could be to patients, families and the community.

"We are getting wonderful feedback from our families, as well as



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touching stories of their experiences," Hagen said. "There are not many Board Certified Music Therapists in the United States so we are fortunate to have Jen living in our community and to have her as part of our Hospice Team."

Conley mainly uses a small Celtic harp when she plays at a patient's bed side. She also utilizes a reverie harp, which is smaller in size and designed to rest in the lap. The soft timbre of the instrument is soothing and calming. It doesn't require any musical background to play, and patients find strumming the instrument soothing.

Conley said part of effective music therapy is determining what types of music to utilize. Often, individuals can readily identify songs and music that is meaningful to them. Other things to take into consideration are ethnicity or nationality and religious background.

Family members often sit around a patient's room, lost for words and not knowing what to do. This is when Conley encourages them to sit next to the bed or to hold hands. However, it is also important to know how the family is dealing with the illness and where their level of comfort lies.

"I've had family members sit at the bed side and hug and speak their good-byes to their loved ones while I play. Somehow it seems to give them a certain permission, enveloped in this cocoon of music," Conley said. "I take my cues from the family. Each situation is unique."

Conley believes music is an incredible tool for remembering good experiences, even in such distressing times.

"It is a trigger for rekindling a memory," she said. "It affirms one's identity and role in life."

Marti Bezek's mother, Ruth Nelson, age 102, fell while getting out of bed April 16, breaking her right hip and femur. She had successful surgery later that day, but a day or two later seemed confused and was sleeping a lot, which was unusual. From there, things went slowly downhill until she was unresponsive most of the time.

After a week, doctors decided to move her to DeKalb County Rehabilitation Center. She was in constant pain from the broken bones, and she could receive therapy there. They moved her Sunday night, and Monday afternoon she had a stroke. Ruth lost her ability to swallow, all hearing and any memory she had.

During those last days in the nursing home, she was totally unresponsive most of the time and completely unresponsive the last three-four days. Ruth had always loved music, particularly hymns, so physicians suggested the family consider music therapy.

Marti was skeptical, only because Ruth couldn't hear before the surgery, so how would she be able to hear the music in her condition? Her opinion quickly changed. Conley played for Ruth only two times, the second being the day before she died. Marti was amazed by her mother's reaction; there was a response.

"While Jen was singing, my mom reached her hand out several times to touch Jen's songbook and also her hand," Bezek said. "Jen continued to play her harp with one hand and held my mom's hand with her other. I honestly don't know if my mother heard the music, felt the vibration of the music or what, but it was so reassuring for me to know she was calmed during what was her last day. I know she heard it on some level."

Bezek now sings the music therapist's praises. Conley was prepared to play almost everything the family suggested and the one thing she didn't know, she improvised. She played and sang for Ruth for over an hour each of those two days.

"Jen was wonderful," Bezek said. "She is a very calm, loving person and I am so grateful I had the opportunity to meet her."

As for the program's future, Conley is writing a grant proposal for a CD project that will include original songs written by DeKalb County Hospice patients.

In addition to playing for critically-ill patients, Conley often works with patients much earlier along in the disease process. She encourages them to write poetry or prose that expresses their feelings regarding their illness or life experiences in general. She then sets their writing to music with the patient's input, creating an original song. Conley said patients and their families often are surprised to find joy in the songwriting process, and certainly in the completed project.

"The songwriting is another way to relive all the fun memories families have," Conley said. "It's also a way to process the emotions that go along with the illness."

Does being around illness and sadness take its toll on Conley? A little bit, she concedes.

"It's hard to see people struggling or in deep sorrow. At the same time, I have a much greater sense of the privilege it is to be part of such a tender time. The music seems to help provide not only comfort, but an outlet for the wide range of emotions which are present during these times.

"Before I enter I say a simple prayer: 'let me be a channel,'" she said. "And then I let the Spirit do its work." ■



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