

Tidewater arts group promotes healing power of music in Newport News

Harpist shares expertise with Peninsula health professionals, caregivers



Cathy DeWitt, left, plays a duet with Virginia Symphony harpist Barbara Chapman at the "Sing Me Back Home" program sponsored by Tidewater Arts Outreach on Monday. Riverside PACE in Newport News hosted the event at which DeWitt, a musician in residence for the Shands Arts in Medicine program in Florida, instructed health professionals and caregivers in the powers of music for healing. (Prue Salasky / June 11, 2014)

Related



Psaltery

10:04 p.m. EDT, June 11, 2014

As a musician in residence at the Shands Arts in Medicine program in Florida, Cathy DeWitt has played harp, piano and guitar, and sung bedside for patients for 20 years.

"Music is especially useful where verbal communication is limited — with autism, aphasia or **Alzheimer's**," she said.

On Monday, DeWitt conducted a workshop, "Sing Me Back Home," for **Hampton Roads** health professionals, caregivers and musicians. It was sponsored by Tidewater Arts Outreach and hosted by the Riverside PACE facility in **Newport News**.

"It's important to train the arts and medical communities about the needs and benefits of arts in health care," said MaryAnn Toboz, executive director of Tidewater Arts Outreach. Earlier this year, the group brought in other national experts to conduct workshops in "Songwriting with Soldiers" and the "Alzheimer's Poetry Project."

DeWitt gave an overview of the uses of music in a health-care setting before giving hands-on instruction. She demonstrated the power of music to lift spirits and create therapeutic effects by picking out "Greensleeves" on a bowed psaltery.

"It always starts a conversation," she said of the distinctive stringed instrument whose chromatic sound she considers ideal for Irish and medieval music. She then led the group in singing an impromptu rendition of "Row, Row Your Boat," allowing a natural harmony in the round to evolve. "See how you found the melody, followed the rhythm, sang in round, everyone going with the flow," she said. "You've got to love it."

The music program coordinator made a clear distinction between music therapy, which is part of a treatment program, has measurable goals and outcomes and is covered by insurance, and the role of a musician in a medical setting. "There's no charting. It's a little more free. It's driven by the patient," she said.

The benefits include relaxation with improved breathing and a reduction in asthma, helping trigger memories, serving as an emotional release and building community. "Music is so subjective, it has an emotional impact," said DeWitt, emphasizing that not everyone will enjoy the same tunes — even though "Amazing Grace" is the most requested song — so it's important to develop a wide-ranging repertoire.

DeWitt, who frequently plays on a lap harp in the **Gainesville** hospital, joined in a duet with Virginia Symphony harpist Barbara Chapman on a harp she had tuned to the smaller instrument's pentatonic (five-note) scale. Its simplicity encourages interaction with patients, she advised, and it appeals to all ages. DeWitt has worked on a national project to increase intergenerational contact using medical students to help seniors create contemporary works of art based on personal histories.

"It's a fascinating field. Now there's so much science behind it," said Chapman, who once considered a career in music therapy. She has found that her father, who has Alzheimer's, is able to remember the words to hymns when he is otherwise unable to speak. Sitting at the piano calms him. "It's an anchor of an old memory," she said.

Ellie Galloway, regional director of the **Alzheimer's Association** for the Middle Peninsula and Northern Neck, has attended several Tidewater Arts Outreach programs. "We are trying to encourage people to use music, dance and art for caregiving. It's great to see that it's not just happening in homes, but in hospitals, too," she said.

Maryanne Lee, executive director of Commonwealth Assisted Living in **Kilmarnock**, attended to find something enjoyable for the home's residents. "Anything to make my residents happy," she said.

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The group's mission is "to uplift the human spirit by bringing live, quality music and arts experiences to people in Hampton Roads who are in homes, hospitals, shelters, facilities and dependent care programs or otherwise are isolated from society."

The 10-year-old group is funded by private contributions, grants, special events and arts commissions in six cities in Hampton Roads. It conducts regular workshops and outreach.

For information: 757-965-5155; <http://www.TWartsOutreach.org>.