

Cathy DeWitt



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My Info

Name: Cathy DeWitt

Position titles: Musician in Residence/Music Program Coordinator

Kind of Facility: Shands Hospital at the University of Florida

How many hours do you work a week or month? 15-20/week

Are you paid? Yes

Is it a fair pay? Yes

Benefits? No

Do you have more than one facility? There are several hospitals within the Shands Healthcare System, but they are all under that umbrella, so my work in every facility counts the same. I am in the regular hospital, the new Cancer Hospital, the Children's Clinic, and occasionally the Rehab facility.

Are you volunteering? No Are you working one on one? Groups?
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Interest stories:

SIDEBAR: For nearly twenty years, Shands Hospital in Gainesville, Florida, has been the home of Arts in Medicine, an international leader in the arts and healthcare movement. Created in the early nineties by pediatric oncologist/poet John Graham-Pole and nurse/artist Mary Rockwood Lane, A.I.M. brings the arts into the hospital setting in a variety of ways, from its weekly performance series in the lobby to dancing and drawing at the bedside. A.I.M. has grown from its inception, which brought one artist part-time onto one unit, to a core group of twelve artists in residence supporting and monitoring up to 100 volunteers annually. A.I.M. also maintains partnerships, cultural exchanges, sister programs and projects throughout the United States and in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

MUSIC: THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF HEALING

By Cathy DeWitt • All Rights Reserved • ©2004

Published in Natural Awakenings magazine and in Connections, the online newsletter for the Society for the Arts in Healthcare.

As the Musician in Residence for Shands Arts in Medicine program in Gainesville, Florida, for over twelve years, I have seen and experienced the healing power of music in just about every kind of hospital setting. From the pediatrics waiting room to the geriatric bedside, from the O.R. to the E.R., from an auditorium full of caregivers to a small family holding vigil for their loved one, music has proved to be an amazingly effective, accessible and immediate tool for healing.

Just one song can completely alter a patient's mood. Countless times I've had the nurse step into the room and say, "Look at the improvement in those vitals!" after singing a song with the patient. I've had a child who was curled up in pain start strumming the small harp I held in front of him, then sit up and continue strumming wordlessly for ten minutes, eyes shining, his pain forgotten. I've had families visiting separate patients who were roommates, with the curtain closed between them, open the curtain to join together in song, and continue singing after I left the room.

Music brings dramatic results to patients who have Alzheimer's, dementia, and other memory disorders. Patients who have not spoken a coherent sentence in weeks (according to the staff) may be able to sing along with entire songs. Patients who have a flat affect and sit slumped in their wheelchairs become animated and start moving. And sometimes, singing these songs actually triggers something in the mind that makes it suddenly possible for the patient to remember and speak of a past experience.

Oliver Sacks, noted author and expert neurologist, explains: "... a stroke or dementia can cause aphasia, the inability to use or comprehend words. But the ability to sing words is rarely affected, even if an aphasic cannot speak them. Being reminded in this way of words and grammatical constructions they have forgotten...may help them start to regain old neural pathways for accessing language...Music then becomes a crucial first step in a sequence followed by spontaneous improvement and speech therapy."(1)

I have had at least one experience where I followed a patient throughout this entire sequence. Although I generally see patients only for the time period that they are in the hospital, there have been cases where I followed up on their progress in other settings, often a rehab center or hospice. H. was a patient with severe brain injury from an accident. After being in a coma for nearly a year she

had recovered enough to be placed in various hospital rehabilitation settings, but still had problems with memory and with speaking coherently. She would insert nonsense words into sentences that otherwise made sense. She had been a successful professional psychologist. Cindy, the speech therapist, was interested in how music might affect her. When I asked H. what her favorite song was, she said “Jingle Bells.” So, I started singing with her--first Jingle Bells, then Elvis, the Beatles, and Motown, as she began to remember other songs she liked. She seemed to get more coherent every time I saw her, and soon Cindy was having all of the staff sing with her as much as possible. Eventually she was well enough to be sent to off-site Rehab. I went there to visit her and she was completely with it--she knew everybody's name, remembered me, remembered the accident, her family, everything. She was getting ready to go home, and said she was nervous and scared, which certainly seemed appropriate to me.

These days there is so much research and scientific evidence that more and more people are beginning to believe in the healing qualities of music. But this is something that's been going on since ancient times. Whether it was David playing on his harp or shamanic healers drumming the demons out, it was noted early on that “Music hath charms to soothe the savage beast.”

Be it a rock concert, an opera, a sing-along in a nursing home, or at the bedside, sharing music brings people together—energetically, physically and emotionally. It creates a sense of community and connection. Even the most isolated and withdrawn people have an opportunity to become aware of others, and of the experience they are sharing. Barbara Crowe, past president of the National Association for Music Therapy, says, “Therapeutic music can make the difference between withdrawal and awareness, between isolation and interaction, between chronic pain and comfort—between demoralization and dignity.” This is indeed a powerful tool to bring to the healthcare setting, and one that I feel privileged to carry with me wherever I go.

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Cathy DeWitt is a jazz singer, folksinger/songwriter, Positive New Thought musician, and a graduate of the International Harp Therapy Program (IHTP). She is currently the Music Director at Unity of Gainesville in addition to her work with Arts in Medicine. For more information visit www.cathydewitt.com and www.shands.org/aim.

Creating Community With Music at the Bedside in 10 Steps

June 27th, 2010

Recently I've had a lot of folks asking me about our Arts in Medicine program at Shands (www.shands.org/aim). With our Summer Intensive coming up in July, and the webinar I co-hosted last week for the Society for the Arts in Healthcare (www.theSAH.org), I've been collecting a lot of resource material. I thought I would post this simple guideline to entering a room as a musician in a hospital or healthcare setting. Hope you find it helpful!

MATERIALS NEEDED: A musical instrument such as a guitar, bowed psaltery, ukulele, dulcimer, or rolling keyboard, the book "Rise Up Singing" and your voice.

1. Carrying and perhaps playing the instrument, stop and look into the room.
2. If the patient looks interested, ask if they would like to hear a song.
3. Ask where they are from, what kind of music they like, whether they have a favorite song or artist.
4. Invite them to sing with you. You can either do this right away, or sing one first and then ask "Would you like to sing one with me?" Often if you start singing a song they like, they will join in without having to be asked.
5. If they can't think of anything, give them the Rise Up Singing book to look at.
6. Pick a song from the book or a song of the patient's choice and sing it with or for them. If family or friends are visiting, give them the opportunity to participate as well.
7. If there is another patient in the room who also seems to be enjoying the music, invite them into the process, perhaps opening the curtain between the beds if needed. ASK FIRST: "May I open this?"
8. Repeat the process with that patient and their visitors, if any. Nine times out of ten, there will be a connection of some sort discovered between the patients— the music, where they are from, what their illness is, the career of the family members, etc.
9. You have now created a small community within the room. Even if it's just you and one patient, you have made a community by sharing the gift of music.
10. Music can also have personal therapeutic benefits for the patient, including: relaxation, distraction from their pain, alleviating their loneliness and/or depression, taking them temporarily out of their environment, serving as a memory trigger to remind them of and recapture a more pleasant experience. Music can be chosen for these specific reasons.

The patient may have a story to share that's brought on by the music. This may result in conversation among family members, visitors, roommates, etc. Sometimes even if the patient is asleep, or unconscious, it may be the family members who really want and need the music. It has benefits for them as well!

Music is the Gift that Keeps on Giving...

December 18th, 2008 . Posted in [Music & Arts in Healing](#) | [1 Comment](#) »

Tags: [arts in medicine](#), [Music & healing](#), [music heals](#)

During this season of busyness, it's easy to get stressed out, aggravated and even exhausted – especially for a musician! For me this time of year is packed to the brim with concerts and events that I'm musically responsible for: at church, the hospital, and other places in the community. It can be overwhelming. This year is particularly frustrating for me because I've been dealing with a condition called "trigger thumb" – which actually came from playing a musical instrument! It's a repetitive movement syndrome, and I was playing the same instrument continuously for an unusually long period of time during a week-long residency, back in August.

But though it's been difficult for me to adjust, at the same time it makes me aware of what a gift it is to be able to do this at all, let alone do it for a living. And even if my playing is not quite up to par, the music still has the same magical effect on people. One example: Arts in Medicine's annual AIM for the Holidays concert in December.



This is an annual event we present in the lobby at Shands hospital, bringing in folks from the community to help us celebrate the holidays with music. Some of the same performers have been coming for years...The Gainesville Flute Ensemble washes over everyone with a lovely sound as flutes of different

registers play beautiful arrangements of Christmas carols. Reb Shaya Isenberg often comes to relay a Chanukah message and this time he was accompanied by a renowned New York musician, Reb Shefa Gold.

The day started with a performance of 40 elementary school children from Jordan Glen singing Christmas songs under the direction of music teacher Jolene Jones. Energetic yet somehow angelic, they had a great time singing and playing their recorders, and were a big hit. They were followed by the jazzy holiday strains of Bella Luna, with Ron Shorr on guitar, David Cook on piano, Laurie Jennings on drums and Annie McPherson on vocals and bass. It was great for Jolene and Annie, who are also in a band together (Patchwork), to get to see and hear each other in this setting. At the end of the set, the next singer, a young woman named Jamie Kramer with a beautiful operatic voice, asked David to play piano for her and they did a lovely rendition of I Wonder as I Wander. Then as Jamie continued to sing, our Arts in Medicine volunteers—Adrienne, SunYoung, and Will Kang— provided accompaniment on flute, violin, and percussion.

Guitarist Robert Roberg showed up next—in an angel costume complete with gigantic white wings! While he was getting ready the volunteer ensemble and I filled the time, and then accompanied him during his performance, along with Jamie. Then two of my musical worlds joined together in a new way, as my church choir, Voices of Unity, sang Dona Nobis Pacem, and Minister Marciah McCartney presented Arts in Medicine with a check from a fund raiser they held on AIM's behalf back in November! Afterwards Shaya read a wonderful story, The Chanuka Guest, and Shefa accompanied him with chanting and an unusual little drone-like instrument, called, I believe, a “shruti.” By now the Flute Ensemble was starting to set up, and they really enjoyed hearing this.

Watching everything unfold, I loved the way each thing flowed into the next and people who hadn't met before played and sang together for the first time. But then, it's always like that at the hospital. The piano—a grant/gift from Childrens Miracle Network when I started there over twelve years ago—serves as a focal point where music can work its magic, creating community. And I am very grateful to be in on it.



I hope your holiday is blessed with both music AND magic. If you can find the time, come visit me at my new websites listed below. I'm really excited about something called “widgets” that my friend Kiki from dancingLight first told me

about! And remember you can go to my online stores at www.cathydewitt.com or www.patchwork.us any time to look, listen, and shop. You'll find a variety of CDs there for your jazz loving friends (Autumn in New York and Love Notes), bluegrass lovin' folkies (Patchwork Rides Again and Live! in Concert), and those in need of a spiritual lift or inspiration (Dreamsong). It's easy and fun, and a way to help us get our music out into the world.

Thanks for your support, and for being part of my community-

Cathy

A Story and Song...How I Got Started

February 12th, 2009

As is the case with many of my most valuable experiences of my life, I was dragged into Shands Arts in Medicine (AIM) at the University of Florida, kicking and screaming. If you had told me thirteen years ago that I would be playing music in the hospital on a regular basis, I would have said "No way!" Hospitals have never appealed to me. In fact, I tend to faint when I get my blood drawn. But I was intrigued by the AIM program, where I live, in Gainesville. As soon as I heard about it, long before becoming an artist in residence, I knew these were good people, doing a great thing.

I remember playing at a restaurant twenty-something years ago. I was doing dinner music, and I had my little baby boy with me in an infant carrier seat up on the bar. A woman came up to me at the end of the set and she had tears in her eyes. "Your music made me feel so much better," she told me. "I'm staying at Ronald McDonald House and my son has to get a bone marrow transplant." At the time I had no idea what she was even talking about. But I knew it was no ordinary encounter. Actually, it was a preview of things to come. I now play on the bone marrow transplant unit once a week.



with Wendy Kissinger and BMTU patient

BUT—it wasn't always easy! It took me two years of roaming around the fringes of AIM and telling other people what great work they did, before I finally got the courage to walk through that door myself. One of the artists, Peg, finally talked me into coming onto a unit to do some concerts in the evening. I started out on the pediatric oncology unit, bringing my friend and musical partner Janet to play a concert with me in the family room/gathering area. She would bring her banjo, and I would play guitar.

Peg was roaming around the unit gathering patients to come into the family room where Janet and I were setting up to play. She reported back that one little girl she was hoping to bring had been too sick to come, but her sister was at the concert. As we began playing, the girl's eyes got wide and her face lit up. She grabbed Peg by the hand and said "We've GOT to go get Sissy! She needs to hear this!" They left the room and Peg accompanied her to her sister's room, where they and the Mom coaxed the little sister into a wagon and started pulling her down the hall. She moaned and fretted, still in pain.

But her sister kept encouraging her.

“Hear the music, Sissy?” she cooed. “Listen to the banjo!”

And as she got closer to the music she began to sit up straighter. As the sounds of the banjo rang out into the hall, she began to smile and sway. By the time she got into the room she was bobbing and dancing in the wagon! Her pain, at least for the time being, was forgotten. She and her sister and mom stayed and enjoyed the music, and the evening turned into a birthday celebration for Peg, which became even more festive as it turned out that one of the patients was having a birthday too.

There’s nothing quite like a group of kids in hospital gowns dancing with their IV poles and singing Happy Birthday, accompanied by the banjo.

And that’s how it all started for me.

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I feel truly blessed to be able to play music for people in this kind of setting, where the effect it has is so positive and immediate. I’m sure many of you have experienced the power of gratitude. There’s a song I wrote that helps me remember to be grateful every day. If you’d like to hear it, click the following link:

<http://www.reverbNation.com/tunepak/925270>

Happy Thanks Giving!