

# Harpist helps ease the pain of Anchorage hospital patients

By Julia O'malley | Anchorage Daily News

ANCHORAGE - A highway accident six weeks ago crushed Norma Daniels' neck, ribs and pelvis. For six weeks, she's been recovering at Providence Alaska Medical Center in a small room on the fifth floor where hand-made signs taped to the wall remind her how to swallow.

She's become accustomed to the day-and-night schedule of the hospital, the jaundiced light and the muted decor, the smells of antiseptic and cafeteria food, the sounds of nurse chatter and old movies playing rooms away on television.

The hospital is not a generally pleasant place, as illness and injury are not pleasant things, and on an afternoon a few weeks ago Daniels was counting the days until she might be able to go home.

Then there was a knock on her door. The face that appeared belonged to Liu-Hsiu Kuo, a slight, quiet woman pulling a trolley.

On the trolley was a large wooden harp.

Kuo greeted her, unfolded a small stool, arranged herself and put her fingers to the strings. A cascade of airy notes spilled into the room, masking the bustle outside the door. Daniels leaned back on her bed, forgetting for a moment about her annoying neck brace and nagging pain. She let her eyes focus on the snow flakes falling against the gray sky outside her window.

"It was like I was on a cloud," she said.

Kuo played on. It's her job to transport people with music.

## EXPRESSION

Kuo has been the therapeutic musician at Providence since the fall. A full-time member of the staff, she keeps an office in the hospital's Spiritual Care Services department, home to the hospital chaplains. Previously Providence employed what's called a music thanatologist, who played harp mainly to give comfort to the dying, but Kuo will play for any patient.

Practicing thanatology requires special training, which Kuo doesn't have, but the hospital was impressed with Kuo's natural compassion and experience using music to heal in other ways, said Monica Anderson, who oversees the Spiritual Care department. Kuo interned for six months doing music therapy in German hospitals, played for the anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and organized healing concerts for victims of

the Chinese earthquake in 2007. The hospital will pay for her continued training as a music therapist, Anderson said.

Though Kuo's adept at half a dozen instruments, the harp is most portable and makes the most soothing sound, she said. Studies have shown that harp music helps to relieve anxiety and calms patients. The human heart beat, the breath and brainwaves all have rhythms. The vibrating strings of the harp complement those, she explained, and harps have been used since biblical times.

Kuo was raised in Taiwan and learned to love music from her parents. Her mother worked as an art teacher, and her father worked in a steel plant. In the evenings, they would play, and she would imitate them. Soon, she began taking lessons. Music was a happy part of an otherwise unhappy childhood, she said. Taiwan is a strict hierarchical society and children are at the bottom. They are encouraged to conform and suppress individuality.

"Learning is very painful," she said. "You have to memorize these things, and you cannot ask questions."

Music and improvisation were a way she could resist the oppressive orderliness of her upbringing, she said. As a teenager she also took an interest in Chinese medicine and acupuncture, interning with a traditional healer. As a young adult, she studied music in Germany, completing a doctorate degree in the United States.

Her harp teacher in Germany had an autistic son who rarely spoke but played the bass. Kuo forged a friendship with him.

"My professor talked to me, you should do something with that, your gift," she said. And so she decided to be a music therapist.

## REQUESTS

In mornings Kuo plays harp in a lobby near the day surgery area. On a recent day, a group of family members crowded chairs. Some of them passed Kleenex between them, wiping tears. Kuo pulled the harp into her body, coaxing out ethereal notes as people passed.

The sad family watched her, dabbing their cheeks.

Kuo never knows what she's going to pluck before she sits down.

"I have to see the person and feel the environment," she said.

The main thing is to keep positive in her mind because music communicates emotion, she said.

"I must have good intentions," she said.

She plays strictly by ear. She'll also take requests. She can play music of "almost every kind except hard metal and rock and roll," she said

Once, while playing in the hospital's cancer center, a patient approached and asked her to play a song she hadn't heard of. She asked the patient to hum it, and began to play along. It was clear the woman had a nice voice, so she asked her to sing. And so, the woman did, there among the IV bags.

"We were all astonished," Kuo said.

After the impromptu concert, Kuo learned the patient was a professional singer from New York. The hospital experience can make people feel as if they've lost their identity, as if their disease has swallowed them, Kuo said. By singing, the woman became more than just a patient with cancer.

"After that she became herself again," Kuo said.

## EMOTION

Music has the power to comfort, and it can weave its way into parts of the brain that stir emotion in surprising ways, Kuo said. She sees that constantly in the hospital. Her own father died when she was in Germany. He was driving and had a heart attack while sitting at a stop light, she said. After the funeral, there was no outlet for her grief. But then, 10 years later, when she'd just started at Providence, she was called to play in a room as a family turned off life support. The patient had been a harpist. Kuo watched the family come up to the bed, one by one, to say their gentle good-byes. Something welled up inside her.

The image of her own father came to her mind. Tears spilled. "I was crying," she said. "I still play the music the whole time."