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The power of music therapy



Music therapist Christian Sjonnesen (left), residents Doris Pachota and Morag Ritchings enjoy singing at Orchard Valley. *Cara Brady/Morning Star*
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By [Cara Brady - Vernon Morning Star](#)
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If, as [John Lennon](#) said, "music is everyone's possession," it is one that remains precious to people for their whole lives.

Music therapist Christian Sjonnesen knows what it is like to not be able to express himself verbally.

"I stuttered well into my 20s and music was my way to express myself when I couldn't do it with words," he said. Now he uses his music to help older adults who can't express themselves verbally, as well as those who find music therapy is the perfect way to socialize and reminisce, and get some exercise and find pain relief, among other benefits.

While music therapy provides entertainment, it is far more than that. The trained therapist gets to know the clients, their needs and preferences, and makes sure to involve them in the sessions in the way that is best suited to individual therapeutic goals.

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"I was close to my grandmother growing up and I'm comfortable with older people and know a lot of the music they like. I love it when people reminisce but they never have to share with the group, it can be private," said Sjonnesen, who grew up in Elliot Lake, Ontario, a mining community where an older person was a novelty. He learned to play the piano as a child and studied music at college. He worked at a variety of jobs before he earned his degree in music therapy from Capilano University.

"I see music therapy as a wonderful way to help other people through my love of music. I keep on learning as the people I work with share with me. There's a great camaraderie in sharing music and singing together that people don't have any more when they used to have to make their own music," he said. "I make sure that I have a big variety of songs available so I can meet requests. The biggest compliment for me is when people ask for days ahead when I am coming again, and when they tell me, 'You don't sing to us, you sing with us.'"

He finds music reaches people when other things can't. For example, someone who had little short-term memory remembered the page where a favourite song was in his songbook. He has been told that the music therapy provides pain relief and there are fewer requests for pain medication after a music therapy session.

Music therapy provides an enjoyable and engrossing activity for people of all musical abilities. Sjonnesen incorporates the keyboard and guitar into his programs and has had bell choirs for people who want more challenge.

"People really take pride in being able to make music. Sometimes it can be the only thing that puts a smile on their faces," he said.

He is concerned that music therapy programs have been cut from Interior Health-controlled facilities with no explanation, and not, as far as he knows, from a lack of funding.

He is quoted in the *North Shore Outlook*, Aug. 3, 2011, saying, "Once music therapy positions are axed it is only a small step for health authorities to strip other therapy resources, such as recreation therapists, from hospitals, hospices and residential facilities. I would like to see music therapists reinstated where they were cancelled. We are taking quality of life of residents."

He knows that residents where music therapy programs were cut miss the music and he continues to work in other facilities and do what he can to help music therapy remain available to seniors. He appreciates that volunteer entertainers provide a valuable service to care facilities but said they cannot take the place of trained music therapists in using music to help residents.

"I know what it was like not to have a voice and I want to speak for those who don't have a voice in these matters. They and their families were ignored when they requested that the music therapy remain. Music should not be taken away from people."

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