

Music is medicine at Crossroads Hospice in Port Moody

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Published: April 03, 2013 9:00 AM

Updated: April 03, 2013 9:17 AM

Pearle Horne asked that her hair be styled today.

Now, an oversized sport watch fastened securely around her frail wrist, she lays her beautifully coiffed silver head on a pillow and relaxes in her room for most of the morning, waiting for noon to arrive.

With little coaxing, her eyelids grow heavy, then fall. A haunting ragtime melody gradually builds in her subconscious:

Five-foot-two, eyes of blue,

But, oh, what those five foot could do.

She is taken back.

The staccato of shoes on the dance floor, keeping time with the piano chords, pounds in her chest. Horne is uninhibited as she sways to the music, watching from the sidelines.

Suddenly, she feels fingers tap her shoulder. Her senses are stirred. She turns and smiles at him for the first time.

THE LIGHT

Jennyfer Hatch makes a punctual entrance for her weekly gig at [Crossroads Inlet Centre Hospice](#) in Port Moody, her honey-hued, black-trimmed acoustic guitar in hand.

Almost immediately, the mood in the hospice's common area brightens.

Hatch is completing her final year of [Capilano University](#)'s Bachelor of Music Therapy program. She chose Crossroads for her practicum because of its beautiful, home-like environment and friendly staff.

In turn, the hospice can add a powerful dose of distraction to its pain management arsenal — music therapy.

“I told her, ‘Just start playing [the guitar] and they will come,’” says Janice Hansen, Crossroads’ manager of hospice programs and administration.

Today, Hatch has an audience with Horne, who’s 90 and came to the hospice in February, in a relaxation room with cream-coloured walls and minimalist decor. The eye is drawn to a tray of sand and shells, a miniature rake resting on top, placed on a table in the corner.

A nurse parks Horne’s mobile bed facing the window so the sun can stream across her face. Hatch pulls up a chair.

After briefly catching up, Hatch gently gets down to business, asking her friend of three weeks whether she would like to hear “You Are My Sunshine” or “This Little Light Of Mine.”

Hatch strums some introductory notes — the rich, deep tones vibrating through the tranquil room.

Leaning in close, Hatch asks, “Where should the light go today? Do you have any pain today?”

“Not so far,” responds Horne.

“Good,” smiles Hatch. “How about some light for your amazing hair?”

“Yeah, how about that,” Horne shakily agrees.

“Alright, so we are going to put the light deep into your hair,” Hatch tells her.

And the song begins:

Feel it deep down in your hair; I'm going to let it shine.

Feel the light in your hair; I'm going to let it shine.

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

“Beautiful,” remarks Horne.

“Thank you,” says Hatch.

THE DANCE

Pearle Horne, who was born in Regina but considers herself a Vancouverite — she moved to the West Coast when she was three years old — admits she has never played an instrument. Sketching and painting people, animals and flowers, you name it, that's her forte. The creative medium kept her mind occupied during lonely periods of her life. (“I didn't have much of a family,” says Horne. “My daughter died in 1972.”)

But through music, Hatch has elicited anecdotes from Horne about her nine decades of life.

“Music and songs act as a catalyst for memory and storytelling,” explains the younger woman. “It lightens and deepens, can brighten for some people and be emotional for others.”

Hatch's favourite story is the one about Horne dancing the Charleston decades ago with her husband to the tune “Has Anybody Seen My Girl?”

Frank was his name, it was a second marriage for both of them. They met at a dance and were inseparable for 28 years until his death a few months ago.

“He came and asked me to dance,” recalls Horne. “He didn't know whether I looked like a zombie or what. He approached me from behind.

“It was like we danced together all our lives. It was just so easy.”

A few moments later, Horne has peacefully drifted off to sleep.

“She’s a beautiful spirit,” Hatch says.

THE MUSIC

Starting in September, Hatch will log 1,000 internship hours before being certified by the Canadian Association for Music Therapy. One of her sites will be the Port Moody hospice, where she will continue to alleviate residents’ anxiety and pain, even their boredom.

The Tri-City native also worked in long-term care homes and with special needs children in School District 43, where one of her main goals was to promote social interaction.

Hatch has been carrying a tune since she was a toddler. Classically trained in wind instruments for 10 years, she only picked up the guitar when she pursued her music therapy career.

Hatch says with Horne, her main goal as a music therapist is to reduce restlessness and discomfort through an intervention of using her favourite songs. “I find outside of her musical therapy session, she has a fair bit of pain and discomfort. The symptoms are relieved through the distraction of music.”

QUE SERA, SERA

Ten or so minutes have passed and Horne is awake again.

“I had a good nap,” she announces. “I was sort of aware that things were going on around me.”

Hatch will sing to Horne for about an hour, depending on the older woman’s energy level. Seeing that she is growing weary, Hatch decides it’s time for one last song.

This time, Horne sings along:

Que sera, sera,

Whatever will be, will be

The future’s not ours to see

Que sera, sera

What will be, will be.

“I love that,” says Horne.

It’s a poignant tune — given the venue, given the time of her life — that proves to be emotional for Crossroads communications officer Kelly Parry, who has been sitting in on the session.

“Today is my birthday,” says a tearful Parry. “And to spend my day with you is probably the best gift I could get.”

Responds Horne, “That’s great. We really did have something to celebrate.”

Parry asks Horne if she is hungry.

“A little bit,” she says, agreeing with Hatch that they have worked up an appetite with all this music.

After lunch, the music gone, Horne will retire to her room and work on a painting, something that will remain.

Music therapy has a history of helping

Modern music therapy arose from the ashes of the world wars when musicians would pacify shell-shocked soldiers in field hospitals through song.

“Complaints about pain, discomfort and being in the hospital diminished when musicians came into the wards,” says Stephen Williams, coordinator with Capilano University’s Bachelor of Music Therapy program.

In 1944, the world’s first undergraduate degree program was founded at Michigan State University. Capilano College, as it was called at the time, set the stage for music therapists in Canada with the start of its program in 1976.

One of the program’s most celebrated alumnae, Alpha Woodward, sings with the youngest survivors of the Bosnia-Herzegovina civil war

at the Pavarotti Music Centre in Mostar, Bosnia. She helps the children, who are suffering from war-related mental and physical injuries, put their lives back together.

Music therapists use various techniques — singing, playing instruments, improvising and songwriting, to name four therapies — to engage their clients. This practice promotes, maintains and restores mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health.

Mental health agencies, physical rehabilitation centres, nursing homes, schools, substance abuse programs and hospice programs often employ music therapists.