Healing Harps, Healing Words

Students in the Healing Harps classes have begun to perform for others

Patients Benefit from Creative Arts-Based Healing Program

The use of art and music alongside the modern technology of medical science might seem like an extreme juxtaposition. However, the patients and families affected by the Arts in Healthcare Program at Eisenhower Medical Center have made it a hospital-wide phenomenon. Jeannette Debonne, the program's director, is not surprised. "The patient satisfaction level with the program is quite apparent," says Debonne. "Patients write us letters all the time. Nurses and doctors receive comments. People feel nurtured having a musician play for them." Eisenhower Medical Center is part of an international movement in health care. "Hospitals all over the country are recognizing art as a significant element in the healing process,"Debonne explains. "Art can have a powerful effect on a patient's mind and spirit. It can affect their ability to heal."

Debonne, a member of the Society for Arts in Healthcare, joined Eisenhower Medical Center in 2001 as its first artist and musician-in-residence. She came to the job with top-notch credentials as an accomplished studio artist with more than 20 years experience as a seasoned Celtic harpist.

Dixie Schulman (a former harp student) and her husband Dr. Joseph Schulman were instrumental in providing Debonne with the funds to start the program. Debonne purchased eight small harps and began giving lessons."My idea was to teach people harp to help them heal themselves. I wanted to offer classes to any patient who was interested. Since then, so many have told me it has made a difference in their recovery."

Today, Debonne teaches 20 students in three different classes, two beginners classes and one intermediate. Some students are now good enough to play at outside venues, including the Eisenhower Five Star Club, an adult day care facility for adults with memory loss. "It has evolved beyond my wildest dreams. I didn't think I would have three classes and a waiting list of 12 people." Debonne says an interesting outcome is that the program has come full circle. "The patients came to the harp for their own healing. Now, in return, they are giving back by playing for others."

The Arts in Healthcare Program provides live music and music workshops for both inpatients and outpatients. It also includes a Native American flute program, an Art 'n' Soul workshop (also taught by Debonne) that teaches drawing and painting, Art à la Carte, which lets patients create art projects at their bedsides, and Healing Words, a writing workshop facilitated by Diane Mathias, MA, an expressive arts practitioner for the Arts in Healthcare Program. Mathias leads this program for cancer patients as well as a Healing Words for the Bereaved group. The workshops meet weekly in the Eisenhower Lucy Curci Cancer Center and are a cornerstone of the Arts in Healthcare Program.

"Writing is a wonderful complementary healing modality, a terrific stress reliever and an incredible way for people to find a voice," says Mathias, who says that being a writer is not a requirement for her workshops. "I don't care about grammar or spelling or handwriting. It is more about word expression. We work with words, phrases, poems, songs, pictures, and then let the flow happen. It is amazing to hear the beautiful phrases that eventually emerge from the work we do. It gives people confidence to move forward and explore."

Mathias's students find her workshops to be a safe place to express their feelings and deal with often difficult emotions such as anger, depression, grief, and fear. "We have class collaborations, we write letters to our loved ones, we write poetry, we often work with pictures – all of it affords the participants a record of their own thoughts, feelings and ideas,"Mathias explains. "It is a way to look at regrets or loss and eventually see them as gifts. They learn, through their writing, how to make sense of things that often do not make any sense at the time."

WORDS CLAMORING AT THE DOOR Words clamoring at the door, I welcome them: Come in! Come in! Bring yourselves, your friends and your distant relatives. O Naked Words! Come in and be clothed; Let me hug you, touch you, hold your close to my heart and my Spirit. Arrange yourselves into a phrase that I can understand And stand so I can listen to each one, separately and together. Please don't push! There is room for all. Healing Words Collaborative Poem March 2007

Healthy Living is a publication of Eisenhower Medical Center · © Copyright 2015 All Rights Reserved · www.emc.org