

The Medicine of the Mind: Full-Time Music Therapy at Hospice Savannah

By Clark Bryon

A former U.S. Senator from Illinois named John A. Logan once said, *Music is the medicine of the mind*. Nowhere is that better understood than at Hospice Savannah. That is why it is the only organization in the area to employ a full-time music therapist as part of the care team for its patients.

Amy Adams came to Savannah about five years ago from her hometown of Peachtree, Georgia. Adams is a highly qualified and very talented music therapist. She earned her bachelor's degree in Music Therapy – a five year undergraduate program – from Georgia College & State University in Milledgeville, and her Master's degree in Neurologic Music Therapy from Colorado State University. Adams is licensed both nationally and in Georgia.

So what is Music Therapy? The American Music Therapy Association defines it this way:

Music Therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program.

Adams is an integral part of the interdisciplinary team of medical professionals which includes doctors, nurses, nurses' aides, social workers, chaplains, volunteers and others.

Referrals come to Adams from every kind of team member, but mostly from social workers. She does a music therapy needs-assessment for the patient to determine if therapy is indicated and what the goals for that patient will be. "We can take whatever goal the care team has for the patient - whether it is increasing motor activity, increasing spiritual and emotional support, increasing self expression, coping skills, or providing support for the family - and enhance it with music therapy," said Adams. Music therapy, combined with counseling and other therapies can increase the quality of life for a hospice patient considerably.

Adams said that patients with neurological disorders or injuries often benefit most from music therapy – Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, ALS, dementia, and brain cancers – anyone who needs additional cognitive stimulation. With the skillful use of her voice, her guitar, and other small instruments that patients can play, Adams engages the patient in ways that no other type of therapist can. "We do a lot of singing!" said Adams. The goal is always to get the patient engaged somehow. Levels of engagement differ from patient to patient and could be as simple as making and maintaining eye contact with the music therapist for 30 seconds, to much more involved activities such as singing and songwriting. It all depends on the needs and cognition level of the patient.

"Particularly with hospice patients, it could sometimes be an opportunity for expression that may not otherwise occur," she said. "It may be an opportunity to share and process emotions and anticipatory grief in a way that perhaps no other member of the hospice team or the patient's family

has ever been able to evoke. It gives the patient an opportunity to be creative and express themselves in a healthy, positive, and safe way.”

Music therapy is introduced as early as possible because things change so quickly with hospice patients. Cognitive, speech, and motor skills can diminish rapidly, making music and other therapies increasingly difficult to administer with a lower potential for success. Music therapy serves to preserve some of the vital neurological pathways to the outside world that are beginning to close. Music therapy is not curative; it is palliative, meaning that it isn't intended to “fix” anything in the patient. Rather, it is to bring comfort and increased self expression, which is crucial to the quality of the life the patient has left.

Music therapy is an evidenced-based science. “There are physiological reasons why all of this works,” said Adams. She gave the example of a person who is not able to speak because of a left-brain injury. In all likelihood, that person can still sing because song is produced from another section of the brain on the right side. Singing can allow a patient to express his or her needs through song. Singing can also serve to retrain the brain for speech.

Rather than just asking a patient how they feel about their impending death, music can be the subject and the tool that leads to the greatest emotional relief and comfort. Discussing what is the patient's favorite music and why, often leads to songs and discussions that provide the emotional release needed to express how they are feeling about life and death. “Music is so powerful in opening up these emotions,” said Adams.

Few things are more important to emotional and physical comfort than the ability to express what one is feeling. That's easier said than done - or should we say, easier *sung* than *said*.

To bring attention to this important complementary therapy, Hospice Savannah is proud to welcome one of the world's leading cognitive neuroscientists as the guest speaker for its 6th Annual Lecture Series. Peter Janata, Ph.D., Department of Psychology at U.C. Davis, will present at St. Joseph's/Candler and at MHUMC's Grand Rounds, and the public is warmly invited to attend his lecture “Nurturing the Sense of Meaning in Life through Music-Evoked Remembering” on Friday, January 24th in Stewart Hall, First Presbyterian Church of Savannah on Washington Avenue.

Music and a complimentary luncheon will be provided at 11:30 a.m. with the lecture at noon. Pre-registration is required: www.HospiceSavannah.org/LectureSeries or 912.629.1045.