

Comfort in Music

Music-thanatologists of SacredFlight provide comfort and peace for residents nearing the end of life through voice and harp music vigils at Mary's Woods

BY TRACY STEPP

The Lake Oswego Review, August 3, 2006

At Mary's Woods, music vigils with harp and voice offer some comfort and peace at the time of passage, both for the residents who are dying and for their families.

"(Music vigils) help to alleviate pain and anxiety and fear — they provide a sense of calm and peacefulness for our residents," said Evelyn Gerardo Challis, director of pastoral services at Mary's Woods, a continuing care retirement center in Lake Oswego. "And they do that for the families and for any staff that happen to be in and out of the room or walking by. There's a peaceful settling that occurs."

Challis said that since 2004, the music-thanatologists of SacredFlight have provided prescriptive music vigils with voice and harp at Mary's Woods for residents nearing the end of life. SacredFlight is a palliative (easing pain without curing) music practice currently consisting of two music-thanatologists, Sharilyn Cohn and Barbara Cabot. The vigils are specific to each person played for, and are designed to meet the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of terminally ill patients and their families.

"I am deeply impressed and profoundly moved by not only the beauty of their work but also the nature of their ministry," Challis said. "The gift of the arts, specifically music, at the time someone is at end of life really does facilitate a healing process and an opportunity for family to gather memories and to receive spiritual strength and to express feelings and to share in the sense of peace that comes when this music is provided."

"I consider them an essential aspect of our pastoral ministry."

Comfort from the music

Preston Brown, 87, was with his wife, Lois, 83, as she received a music vigil recently from Cohn. Lois, who has dementia, has lived in the Marie-Rose Center Special Care Unit at Mary's Woods for four years. Preston lives alone at a villa in Mary's Woods, and says he comes to feed Lois breakfast every morning.

"It's a good time for me to be with her," he said. "It helps start the day with her as well as me. She doesn't verbalize much but she does communicate."

On the day of the music vigil, the calming effects of the harp music were evident as Lois smiled, then relaxed and slept.

"She's just very peaceful and drifting with the music," Cohn said of Lois.

Preston held Lois' hand, touched her face and kissed her on the cheek as Cohn played soothing music on the harp. Collages of family photographs, flowers, paintings and stuffed animals filled the room.



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Music-thanatologist Sharilyn Cohn of SacredFlight plays a music vigil recently for Lois Brown, who has dementia and is a resident at the Marie-Rose Center at Mary's Woods in Lake Oswego. By Lois' side is her husband, Preston. The music-thanatologists, through harp and voice music vigils, offer a sense of calm to residents and their families.

“She does enjoy it, I know she does,” Preston said of the music vigil. “There’s something so remarkably soothing and sleep inducing — we enjoy it so much. It’s very helpful, and a little music directed particularly to her is bound to be good.

“I think it is good work, it’s wonderful for (both patients and families).”

While music vigils help relieve patients’ pain, sleeplessness and anxiety near the end of life, most music vigils are called for when someone is actively dying. Challis said that at Mary’s Woods, residents themselves tell staff if they desire a vigil, or if they are unable to, family or staff will make a referral.

“Referrals come from staff from our own sense of where that resident is in their journey of life passage,” she said. “And sometimes because someone has been anxious or fearful or painful, we suggest (music vigils).”

The music-thanatologist adjusts the harp music to the person’s breathing, and prescriptive qualities within the music support “letting go” — relieving suffering and freeing patients to move toward a peaceful death.

Cohn said they get letters and cards from families saying that the vigils indeed brought peace to their loved ones. They commented that patients seemed much more relaxed and were breathing easier, and for some it was the first time they’d closed their eyes in days.

Music vigils also can bring families together during a fragile time, Cohn said.

“Loved ones can all sit together quietly, honor and remember the loved one, and work through their own grief or emotions or thoughts,” Cohn said. “People enter into this space where time seems to be suspended; something meaningful occurs during this time.

“Music can create a vessel to hold all the grief, emotions, exhaustion from so many people on so many different levels.”

About SacredFlight

Cohn and Cabot both came to music-thanatology from different careers.

Previously, Cohn was a professional cellist, studio musician and music teacher in Memphis, Tenn., and Atlanta, Ga., and worked in hotel management, and Cabot worked as an internal auditor for financial institutions.

Both discovered a calling for music-thanatology after seeing a 1996 ABC Nightline segment on the program. Cohn and Cabot completed the two-and-one-half year graduate level academic program and clinical internship at the Chalice of Repose Project School of Music-Thanatology in Missoula, Mont., and provide vigils for people nearing the end of life in hospitals, hospices, private homes and long term care facilities.

SacredFlight — which formed in 2001 — has music-thanatologists on call from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, and can arrange vigils at other times when available. Cohn and Cabot do not charge patients and their families for the music vigils, and SacredFlight is dependent on contracts with several local hospitals and donations. The actual cost to provide a vigil is \$175. SacredFlight also has a CD available and Cohn, Cabot and others perform “concerts for the living” in December at local churches.

While providing music vigils for the dying seems as if it might be overwhelmingly sad, both say the work they do fills them with awe.

“It is a great privilege to be invited into that circle of a loved one’s life,” Cabot said. “The music holds the pain, the anxiety, the grief and the tears.”

Part of the group’s mission is to change the perception around death, they say, to help people see it as a natural process. And for both patients and their families, the music seems to provide a passage.

“(The music) helps people to come to a better place of accepting what’s going to happen,” Cohn said. “It helps with letting go and finding understanding and peace.”