

In Your Own Words

Family members and professional care partners talk about the benefits of music

by *Mary Sue Wilkinson*,
Founder of *Singing Heart to Heart*

Note: In June, I asked readers to tell me how they are using music in care. Here is a sample of the responses I received. I hope their words will inspire you.

My goal is to help make it easier for you to use music. To do that, I need to hear from the experts – you! So, I have a simple request. Tell me what you need help with. What would make it easier for you to use music in care? What are the challenges you face? I may not have all the answers, but I'll do my best. I will use your questions to help me choose the most important topics for future articles and training videos. Thank you!

Mary Sue

P.S. The first five people to respond will receive a free copy of my new CD, *Sing Along with Mary Sue: Folk Song Favorites for Young and Old*, to be released in early September.

Diane is a part-time activities associate at a memory care unit on Cape Cod (Atria). She writes:

*There are many stories I could share, but the most moving one for me was when a Person living with Alzheimers (PLwA)'s daughter joined us midway through a music activity. **Her mother has a beautiful singing voice, but the song list has to include just the right artist and title for her to participate.** Fairly new to my role, I am compiling her favorites as we discover them. Anyway, her daughter had taken a seat on the periphery of the group, and was soon wiping away her tears when she heard her mother's solo rendition of "Singing in the Rain." **Afterward, the daughter shared with me that she had not heard her mother sing in years, and it made her day to learn she is still singing.** Of course, I encouraged her to come back!*

Jennifer is a daughter in North Vancouver, BC. She writes:

*My mom, almost 95, **blind and confined to a wheelchair, loves to listen to any music** opportunities we can provide. Mom has lived in a care home for just over two years, and fortunately, has the finances to provide for additional music therapy sessions, apart from the Care Centre's sessions. We call those sessions: Lillian and Friends -as all in her area are welcome to participate too. Mom's latest favorite is Yellow Bird, up high in banana tree I cut out cardboard bananas and bought artificial small yellow birds to attach to plants throughout the facility. Mom may not be able to see them but they are always a talking point as we roll the halls. **Anything that can provide comfort and a smile. I am so self-***

conscious singing out loud and participating in sessions with mom ... but I know she really loves her music times.

Erin is a daughter who writes:

My mom is living with Alzheimers, and moved into a memory care facility about 18 months ago. In that time, she has shown altering and declining symptoms, most recently moving into an Amber state.

Music was always important to her, as her mom was a pianist, ballerina, and piano teacher who ran her own studio. My mom played beautifully, and enjoyed recitals and concerts all her life.

The Activity Director at the facility is good about making sure there are several opportunities to play different types of music throughout the day, taking care to change it up, from Big Band to Instrumental to Classical to Sing-a-Longs. It's fun when I visit and there is music playing, as you can see different residents and how they are responding, from tapping their feet, to humming, to sometimes singing along; moments of joy.

Stephanie is a Social Worker in the Life Enrichment Dementia Unit of a Veterans Home in Tilton, New Hampshire:

*I am continuously amazed when watching our nonverbal residents come alive and sing along with old favorites and patriotic songs when a particular performer comes to our unit. I have one resident in particular who is now basically nonverbal but very active. Of all of our music-loving residents **this gentleman responds so quickly to music, it takes our nursing staff by surprise how he transforms.***

*Ours is a certified [Music & Memory](#) facility which is still in its early stages so my units are still waiting for their own personalized MP3 playlists. While the staff utilize this resource, **I like to be able to offer a more accessible option for families and our residents to share together, singing along.** We are fortunate to have performers visit our facility on a frequent basis **however not all of the residents feel comfortable leaving their familiar surroundings to attend the concert, so I am interested in utilizing resources that have more engaging songs.** We have plenty of CDs from various genres but it tends to be hit or miss. Our residents all have, or have access to, CD players and when they are in our common areas of their neighborhoods, we like to have music playing and staff typically take the opportunity to sing along with the residents.*

Duain, a Recreation Therapist at the same New Hampshire Veterans Home adds:

*We love the way that music brings life back into our residents and **helps continue to keep families connected.***

Thank you to everyone who wrote to me and shared their stories!

I'm Mary Sue. I grew up in Iowa in a musical family and I've been singing as long as I can remember. I got my first guitar when I was twelve years old. My mom saved up green stamps to buy it for me. (Thanks mom!)

I'm the founder of [Singing Heart to Heart and the Young at Heart Music Program](#). My passion for singing with elders started when I sang for my father-in-law who had dementia. He had lost all language but when I sang the hymns he knew and loved; he could sing every word. Perfect pitch. He even added harmony.

*I quickly learned what research is now documenting. **Music is a powerful tool to help us connect, find joy, and spark memories.** Especially for people living with dementia. I've seen this first hand. I lead over 400 singing and music experiences for seniors each year.*

*I'm a career educator, a certified music teacher, an experienced speaker and trainer, and a professional musician. I'm also the author of **Songs You Know by Heart: A Simple Guide for Using Music in Dementia Care.** Teepa Snow endorses my book and my work.*