

Music Therapy: The Benefits for Alzheimer’s Patients and Their Families

Article by Jennifer Wilkins

Worldwide, 47 million people are living with Alzheimer's disease and/or dementia. Alzheimer's is the sixth leading cause of death in the U.S. and is the only cause of death in the top 10 that can not be prevented, cured or slowed. However, there is a way to at least ease the suffering of those afflicted with Alzheimer's: music therapy. Music has the ability to combat memory loss and restore a deep sense of self to those suffering from it. Sometimes, the healing power of music and our human connection to it can triumph where prescription medication falls short.

I had the opportunity to speak with Shirley Glandon, whose husband Fred has been afflicted with Alzheimer's for several years. He is a tall man, though you would not know it as he is usually sitting in his wheelchair. He has a kind and intelligent face, but his gaze is often distracted and unfocused. The disease has steadily progressed to the point where he now remembers very little and lives in nursing care at the Warm Beach Health Center.

What was Fred like when he was younger? What were his interests?

“Fred was always a quiet, humble man. He was very pleasant, very kind, but also reserved. He grew up in the Church. He would attend every Sunday and he enjoyed singing the hymns. He also loved driving. We would go on many trips together. The driving was the hardest thing for him to give up. That was very difficult for him—when the doctor told him he could no longer drive.”

Fred and Shirley were born in Seattle, though they met in Spokane where they both attended college. They were both educators—Shirley as a Special Education teacher and Fred as a school principal.

“Fred always had a kind heart and was big into volunteering. He served as the President of the Board for Bridge Ministries, a non-profit organization for disabled adults.”

How has he been since the onset of Alzheimer’s?

“Well at first we were able to manage it at home. I had in-home caregivers for him and they were very good with him. I had five CDs of men’s gospel music that I would rotate throughout the day. He enjoyed waking up to it.

“That lasted about four years. It just got to be too much. My family and friends had been urging me to place him in nursing care for some time. He came down with pneumonia, and I was sick as well and could not care for the two of us. I consulted his doctor and they said it was time.” Shirley pauses a

moment and her expression saddens. “That was a very difficult time for me, that first week after he moved into nursing. I felt so guilty.

“He’s become very chatty since developing Alzheimer’s. He was always quiet but now he speaks to everyone. Most of it is nonsense words, though. He can say ‘Hi’ and ‘How are you?’ but if the conversation progresses beyond that it just deteriorates into nonsense.

Does he still remember you?

“Well, he’s always asking the nurses ‘Where’s Shirley?’ He may not remember me entirely, but he recognizes me. The memory is gone but the emotions are still there. He also responds very well with Laura [Director of Nursing]. She is so good with him. She always tries to reinforce that I’m his wife.”

What is his favorite type of music?

“Hymns and gospel music are his favorite. He used to sing in the Men’s Chorus when we first moved to Warm Beach. He doesn’t sing with them anymore but he still enjoys attending their rehearsals. He also enjoys the Vespers service. He gets so emotional when he hears them singing, sometime he will cry. It’s a good cry, though; it hits a good spot.”

What differences have you noticed since starting the music therapy? What does the music do to/for him?

“It has been critical for us to have this one normal thing, his music. He still listens to those gospel CDs in his nursing room. He can’t really participate in much anymore except for the singing.

“We sing together. Laura sings with him, too, and he’ll harmonize with her. He’s always on pitch. He’s very likeable. The nurses will visit with him and sing with him, too.”

I was fortunate to witness this myself. One of our nursing staff was resigning that day, and Laura and Fred were up at the reception desk serenading her. They were singing “You Are My Sunshine.” As I listened to them, I realized that other residents in the hallway would join in or start clapping. It was a ripple effect with Fred at the heart of it—his joy and his music reaching out to each of us.

“The music has been very important. It’s opened an avenue of communication between us,” Shirley says with a teary smile. “Our relationship is warmer now. It has given us a sense of normalcy. The real Fred is in there.”