Healing Powers

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Katie Harrill, Gretchen Chardos Benner and Brigette Sutton are three music therapy alumnae who have used their degrees to change the lives of others and to make a difference in the western Pennsylvania region.

Katie Harrill (Post-Baccalaureate Music Therapy, 1998), a board-certified music therapist, believes in the healing powers of music, particularly in the lives of autistic children and those with developmental disabilities. Harrill currently serves as creative arts program supervisor with Wesley Spectrum Services, an organization that provides education, mental health and social services to children on the autism spectrum and their families in the western Pennsylvania region. There, she developed a music therapy program that quickly expanded to become a comprehensive creative arts program for autistic and developmentally disabled children.

“My commitment, devotion and passion for the therapeutic force of music and music therapy as a profession motivates me to serve children,” she said.

In addition to her work at Wesley, Harrill has co-authored a chapter in a book on creative arts therapies, as well as an article in Perspectives (Journal of the Early Childhood Music and Movement Association) titled “Contributions of Sociocultural Theory in Music Therapy for Autistic Children”.

Gretchen Chardos Benner (B.S. Music Therapy and B.M. Music Performance, 2007) provides music therapy in the inpatient behavioral health units at UPMC Mercy Hospital. Live Lobby Music, a program Benner started at Mercy Hospital in 2009, features Duquesne students and alumni who volunteer their time and talent to provide soothing music for hospital patients and visitors.

Benner, who graduated in May 2007 from the Music School with a double major—music therapy and viola performance—got the idea for Live Lobby Music from her experience as a volunteer at Magee Women’s Hospital. As a student, Benner performed on viola and piano in the lobby every other week for three years, voluntarily. She saw the opportunity for volunteer performers to donate their time in a way that could provide joy for the patients, visitors and staff of UPMC Mercy. She outlined the idea to hospital administrators, who approved her plan. Within 30 days of suggesting the program, Benner had the first performers lined up and Live Lobby Music was under way.

Brigette Sutton (B.S. Music Therapy, 2004) is the director of music therapy at Villa St. Joseph, in Baden, PA. During her five years there, Sutton implemented the facility’s music therapy program, making the long-term care facility the first in its area to implement a music therapy program directed by a full-time, board-certified music therapist.

According to Villa St. Joseph’s website, the primary goal of the music therapy program is to enhance quality of life for residents by “restoring, maintaining, and improving psychosocial, cognitive and physical health… by providing motivating opportunities for social interaction, self-expression, reminiscence, calming/coping, movement/exercise, and meaningful community involvement. The Music Therapy Program also embraces residents with Alzheimer’s disease, using music to help residents maintain abilities as much as possible.”

Sutton completed training in neurologic music therapy in February 2012 and has begun to identify co-treatment opportunities with the rehab team at Villa St. Joseph, which has allowed her to broaden her clinical impact. She has also begun to supervise music therapy students from Duquesne and other universities. Additionally, Sutton is an adjunct faculty member at the Mary Pappert School of Music, teaching music therapy repertoire.