Songs of Healing, Rhythms of Life
Music therapy can open doors that disabilities have closed

by Jamie Talan
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Carolyn Kessler has found her voice - and she hasn't stopped singing.

The former intensive care nurse had always loved a good song. She also liked to dance and ski. But a car accident in 2001 left her paralyzed and tethered to a wheelchair, and a depression settled in so deep that she had no interest in anything beyond her room at a rehabilitation center in Manhasset. "I became very shy," Kessler said.

But that solitude was nowhere to be found early last month when she sat before a room filled with strangers at a music therapy meeting at the Garden City Hotel and sang "You Raise Me Up."

The song was a gift to her mother and a close friend, who sat nearby. Inspired by Laurie Crosse, a music therapist formerly at North Shore University Hospital who coaxed her out of depression during the early days of her rehab there, Kessler has gone on the road with her. Together, they tell an inspiring story of strength and hope.

Crosse talked about the treatment process at the therapy meeting, and when Kessler sang, therapists in the room joined in. She beamed and her face moved to the music, in sharp contrast to the rest of her body, which is paralyzed.

Music therapy became a unique way for Kessler to rebuild her lung capacity and strengthen her voice, as well as her confidence, Crosse said. "I've gone from an introvert back to an extrovert," said Kessler, who is in her 50s. She has also regained some movement in her right hand - enough to write a Christmas card and to sign an absentee ballot during the last election.

Therapy science and art

Kessler's presence at the meeting last month, held by the American Music Therapy Association, was a testimonial to the powers of an often misunderstood treatment option for people with all types of medical problems - from autism to stroke and even severe mental retardation.

Music therapy is part art and part science, a way to reach into people's minds and help them express their emotional or physical needs.

Back in the 1950s, during the early days of music therapy, Clive Robbins was a special education teacher in England. He teamed up with U.S. composer and music professor Paul Nordoff, who had visited the school where Robbins worked and was impressed with the idea that song could have dramatic effects on children with severe disabilities.

Robbins and Nordoff, pioneers in the new field, began improvising with the children, who, they would learn, still had music in them. Their therapeutic technique, which

spread throughout the world, is built on the creative expression of music between the therapist and the child.

Nordoff spent almost two decades playing the piano and making up songs to draw his patients out. Robbins was always by his side, guiding children to use musical instruments themselves, or find their own voice. "It was all improvisation," Robbins recalled. "Each child is different, and you never know where you are going or where you will end up."

But one thing is clear during the journey, he added. "Music therapy is the art of developing a human personality through music. The child becomes a participant in life."

Keeping the beat

During the recent music therapy meeting, Robbins played video- and audiotapes of one of their earliest students, a severely disabled 11-year-old girl named Anna. She was blind, autistic and almost always in a wheelchair during the day. Normally, she sat there sullen, with a protective helmet capping her head.

Nordoff began the session with a "good morning" song for the child. Robbins placed a stick in her hand and guided her hand to a drum. He played a dissonant chord as he beat the drum. The music followed her mood. He sang, "Good-Moorrrning," and surprisingly in perfect tempo she repeated, "Good-Moorrning." He played octaves when she sang again. They were improvising together, and she became, in Robbins' words, "the music child." She was totally present, engaged and excited. When Nordoff sang in descending intervals, her face sagged. Anna knew what she wanted. She sang the words, only this time her voice climbed even higher.

And with drumstick in hand, she kept to a beat - even staying in sync with Nordoff. When the music quickened, she beat at 120 beats a minute; when it slowed, so did her drumming. "She was learning how to sustain a beat," he said. "Instinctively, she found her way to hold the beat."

"Music deals with human experience," said Robbins, who started the Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy at New York University in 1988. "Music can bypass areas of disability because of what music is - the healthy part of us all."

Opening doors

To see Robbins captivate an audience of fellow music therapists and students is to understand why his technique has been so successful. He is playful, and downright enchanted with the idea that music can transform lives. "Music therapy is a fairy tale," he said. "And within the castle, she is the princess. We are letting her out."

At the NYU center, 80 children arrive weekly to work one-on-one with therapists trained in the Nordoff-Robbins technique. The goal of creative music therapy, Robbins said, is to provide children with skills they can use to communicate with others.

Eight-year-old Mikey Paul has Down syndrome and many features of autism. He doesn't speak. Every Wednesday he gets off the school bus at home in Plainview and

signs to his mother that it is time to get in the car. Wednesday is his music therapy day at the Rebecca Center at Molloy College in Rockville Centre.

"He's got a lot of emotion that we never saw," said Michel Paul, his mother. "Who would have thought music therapy would open the door for him? It's been amazing."

She says he is now using sounds approaching words. And he's noticing other people, which she said he never did before. She has also learned many things about her son, that he loves the Ramones and Louis Prima. His music therapist, John Carpente, writes songs for Mikey and weaves the types of music he likes into the melodies. They produce sounds together.

A year into Mikey's weekly treatment, Michel Paul noticed the first signs of independent and imaginative play. "He took a can and turned it into a drum," she said. "It was the first time I saw him playing with a toy like a typical kid."

A misunderstood treatment

People who don't understand the underpinnings of music therapy see it as a light form of entertainment - like engaging patients in a nursing home. But it is more than recreation, Robbins said. Like psychology, music therapists practice different schools of thought. While the Nordoff-Robbins method is improvisational and open, others rely on psychoanalytic talk therapy and behavioral techniques. In a psychoanalytic model, therapists play a piece of music and patients are asked to talk about it. Behavior therapists use music to change behavior. There is also a neurologically based music therapy that focuses on strengthening cognitive skills or repairing brain damage.

By contrast, Robbins' technique demands little talking; the therapy itself is music.

It isn't surprising that music therapists are trained musicians. Until recently, the Nordoff-Robbins technique called for a piano player. But in the last five years, guitar players have taken up the calling. Long Island-raised Rick Soshensky works as a music therapist at Jacobi Medical Center in the Bronx. He's only the third guitar player in the world trained in the Nordoff-Robbins technique. "I had to figure out what you can do on the guitar that remains true to the essence of the work," Soshensky said.

Music therapy isn't quite mainstream medicine, but enough research has come out on its powerful effects on the brain that therapists are finding their place in the medical world. Alzheimer's, strokes, autism and Parkinson's are just some of the conditions that improve with music therapy, said Kenneth Aigen, co-director of the Nordoff-Robbins Center. There are similar teaching, training and research centers all over the world. Robbins said he tapes most sessions so that the staff can go over the exchange in detail to analyze which aspects work and which don't work.

The therapy has in recent years expanded to include patients with all sorts of brain damage.

"Alzheimer's patients who can no longer speak cohesively can sing and remember strings of words," said Evelyn Selesky, director of the music therapy undergrad program at Molloy.

Dr. Galina Mindlin, a psychiatrist at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center and Columbia University, has been recording the brain waves of her patients and converting them to musical sounds of the electrical impulses. She calls it "endogenous brain music" and uses the recordings to treat sleep disturbances and anxiety.

But listener beware. Not all music therapy is considered mainstream, and there are a lot of people on the fringes of the field who record sounds on CDs and call it treatment.

Robbins, who at 76 is still traveling the world to train music therapists, believes there is a music child in each and every one of us. "Music is ancient. It speaks to all of us."

Kessler agrees. She sees singing as integral to her rehabilitation in physical therapy. "It's part of me now," she said.

For more information about music therapy, visit the American Music Therapy Association at http://www.musictherapy.org and the Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy at NYU at http://education.nyu.edu/music/nrobbins.