

Witness an online magazine

The Music Therapist

Photographs by Richard Falco

Text by Dr. Tina Brescia

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In this world of instant messages and cell phones there is a quality of immediacy to our communications with others. Everyone has a story to tell and everyone wants to be heard. But what happens to those individuals who are unable to tell their story in a way that others can understand? How do they connect to the important people in their lives? Through all of the communication technology that humans have created, there is still a very basic and very powerful tool for communicating one that is accessible to people on every level of functioning and that is music. Through music therapy there is the possibility of hearing the stories of those we may not have had the privilege of hearing before. There is also a way to help people through life's transitions, through pain and through some of the obstacles that are presented when living with a disability.

For Lisa Sandagata helping people with disabilities find a way to communicate and connect to their world is part of her daily routine. Lisa is a board certified music therapist living and working in Westchester County, New York. She has a master's degree in music therapy and has been working with special needs individuals for almost 20 years. She is the director of outreach services at the Music Conservatory of Westchester's Music Therapy Institute in White Plains. She is one of the approximately 5,000 credentialed music therapists working in the United States today.



Music Therapist, Lisa Sandagata, works with a child with Williams Syndrome at the Music Therapy Institute.



Lisa will use different instruments, songs and technics to address each persons specific needs. The longer she works with an individual the better she can develop a program that addresses their specific needs.

The idea of using music for healing is not a new one. Music has been recognized as a healing art by many cultures such as the ancient Greeks, and the native cultures of the Americas, Africa, Australia, China and India. Though the idea of music as a therapy has existed for centuries the organized discipline of music therapy in the United States can be traced back to the use of music in veterans' hospitals after World War II. In 1950 the first professional association was established entitled the National Association for Music Therapy (NAMT). Educational and clinical training requirements continued to be developed and fine tuned as the music therapists working in the field began to encounter a greater diversity of special needs individuals expanding from the veterans hospitals into schools, group homes and other settings. In 1971 a second organization the American Association for Music Therapy (AAMT) was founded. By 1998 the two associations formed a union and the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) located in Silver Spring, MD currently upholds the ethical standards of clinical practice, professional competencies and education requirements for the field. As defined by the AMTA music therapy is "the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program."



This boy with autism finds comfort in the structure of classical music.



Debbie expresses herself best through improvisation and song.

Lisa will often include parents into a music therapy session.





Lisa must continually assess each clients emotional response as the session proceeds. This is done not only from session to session, but from moment to moment.



Today there is a wide range of individuals receiving music therapy services in the United States. Music therapy is beneficial to so many, including people with AIDS, Alzheimer's, autism spectrum disorders, developmental disabilities, neurological disorders, mental health disorders, medical and surgical patients, hospice and palliative care patients, and of course the continuing needs of those in the veteran's hospitals. It is estimated that over 1.5 million people have received music therapy services in the U.S. in the past year. Approximately 80% of the people that Lisa works with during the week are children and adults on the autistic spectrum, she also works with adults with Alzheimer's disease, people with William's Syndrome and others with developmental delays. There is no cure for Autism, Alzheimer's, William's Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy or so many other congenital developmental delays. It is estimated that one in 150 children are diagnosed with Autism, one in ten people over the age of 65 and over half of those over 85 have Alzheimer's disease. Though the numbers continue to rise and there are no cures for these diseases the interventions that are prescribed are focused on improving skills and assisting people to live ful-

ler lives. Music therapy is one of the interventions recommended to address the social, emotional, physical and cognitive well being of people with these and other diseases or disabilities.

Music therapists have discovered that the structures inherent in music can be used to engage and maintain attention and to encourage response and role expectations. Music is a social art and as such the act of making music with another encourages positive social interactions. Involvement in music is a creative process that offers people opportunities to express difficult emotions through positive means. Music is experienced on both sides of the brain and is able to stimulate cognitive functioning. It is also very useful in assisting with the development of some speech and language skills. For those who cannot express themselves through language music offers an alternative means of communication with others. Music therapy is also being used to alleviate pain for hospitalized children and adults to stimulate memory for people with Alzheimer's and dementia and even to assist in childbirth.



There are situations when nothing reaches a child, yet somehow, music can find a path. A therapist works with a child at a BOCES center in Rye Lake, New York.





Programs, such as music therapy, bring a different form of learning, healing and rehabilitation to hospitals and other institutional environments.

Every week Lisa gets into her car with her guitar in hand, a backseat full of small percussion instruments, a keyboard and a rolling cart as she heads over to St. Mary's Rehabilitation Hospital in Ossining, NY. Her car almost knows the way on it's own as Lisa has been bringing music therapy to the children here for the past fourteen years. As social beings each of us seeks out the comfort of connecting with other people in our lives. Lisa spends her days helping people to express their stories and make connections through music. Music can be like a bridge that supports movement from one place to another. Lisa helps to build the bridge through music. She uses her strengths as a musician and her training as a therapist to support people with disabilities as they strive to express themselves. As she drives to the hospital she begins to think about the children she will see, wondering who is still there and who went home, what is their health status this week, what are the family situations and support systems for these children? What songs did they sing last week and where will they go today in the music? If you ask Lisa why she became a music therapist she will tell you "music serves it's greatest function when it is shared. I truly enjoy making music with others and want very much to be with people in the music. Helping others in this way gives me great pleasure." It is with this pleasure and dedication to helping others that Lisa brings her bag of instruments, her guitar and her self to all of the people she works with.







As Lisa enters the pediatric unit at St. Mary's she checks in at the nurses station to find out which children she will be working with today. In this rehabilitation setting many of the patients remain hospitalized for weeks and months. Each of them has a physical disability either from birth or from an injury. They are here for various medical interventions that require a long period of recovery and therapy. These disabilities interrupt the normal course of a child's development on every level: the social, the physical, the cognitive and the emotional. In addition to physical pain and frustration, these children often feel a limited sense of their own power, isolation and loneliness during their hospital stay. While Lisa is aware of all of this, when she sees the children, she sees Joey's beautiful smile and Sofia's playful sense of humor; she looks beyond the disabilities to see the whole child. Whether she is working at bedside with one child or in the day room with a whole group Lisa creates a space in the music for the children to share and experience their strengths. She allows them to make choices, which is important for these children who have limited choices over the medical interventions that they must endure. She listens to them and honors who they are by creating music with and for them as their specific needs guide her interventions.



Different children will respond differently to the therapist. Their response is always dependent upon how they are feeling physically as well as mentally.

Lisa works at the hospital in a group setting as well as with individuals.



Lisa has also developed different emotional connections to each of the children. As a therapist she needs to create bonds that address the specific needs of the child.





Allen immediately responds to this musical invitation by sounding his voice through a huge smile as his sparkly eyes make contact with hers. Through her music Lisa has turned on the light in this room and in Allen. The effort that Allen makes to vocalize with Lisa takes a great deal of energy for him and every muscle in his body tightens in response to his excitement. Allen does not need to be able to talk, he does not need to be a musician, he simply needs to be himself as Lisa wraps her music around him and responds to his vocal sounds. They are connecting. Allen is not alone, he is being heard and honored. This is his chance to tell his story.

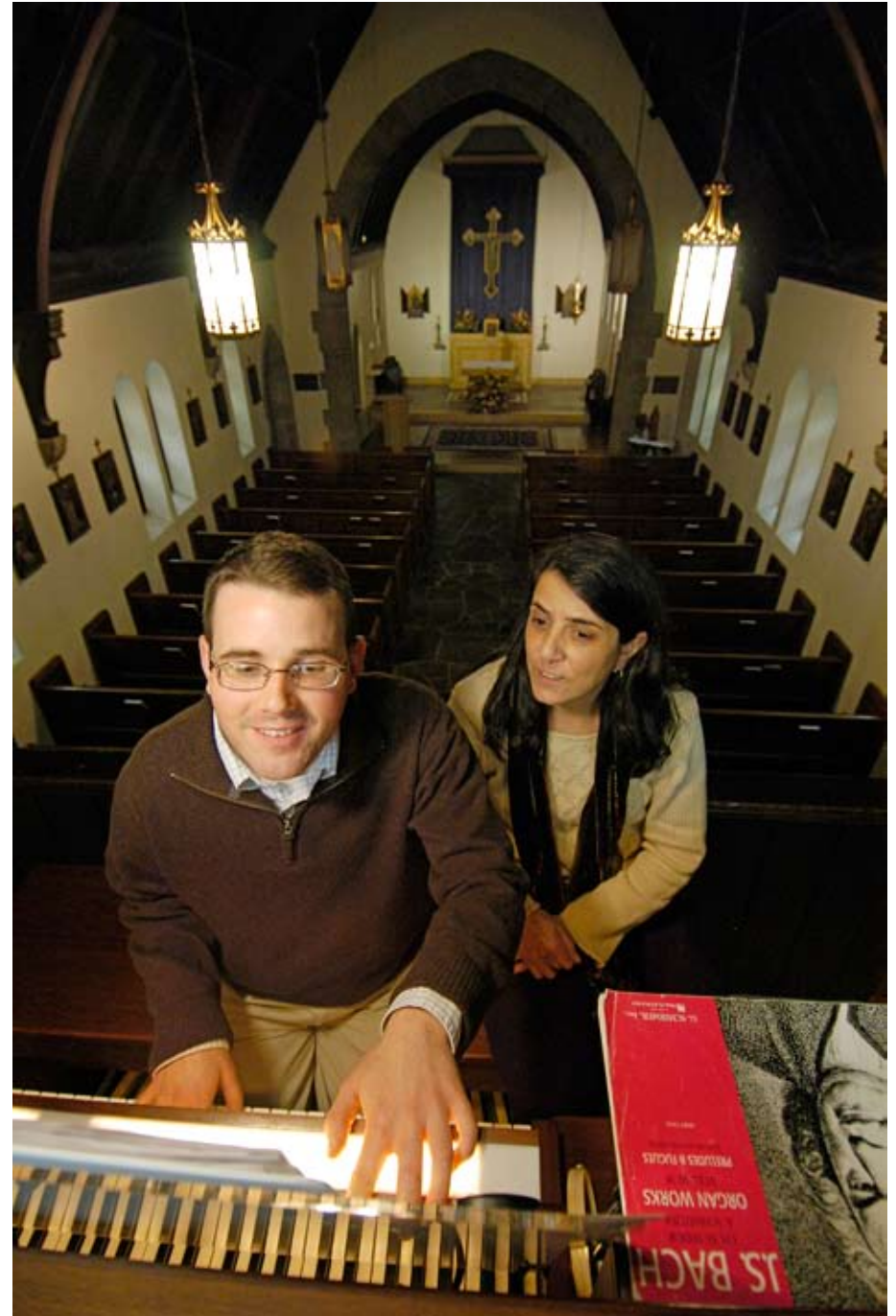
There are many children at St. Mary's hospital and each one that Lisa touches with her music also touches Lisa in return with his or her own way of being. Allen, a fourteen year old is one of these children. Lisa walks into Allen's room. He is lying in his bed, his body stiff with spasticity from his cerebral palsy. He is unable to speak but can make sounds. She gently strums the guitar as if to invite a conversation and then sings a song that she has composed just for him in a warm alto voice "This is a song for Allen, it's Allen's song".



How do the positive effects of music therapy reach beyond the scope of the music therapy session? Hospitalized children find new ways to cope and communicate, people with autism find avenues to express themselves and begin to connect with others, Alzheimer's patients and their families find moments of solace engaging their memories and attention. There are many stories illustrating the power of music and music therapy in the lives of people with disabilities. Lisa is driven by her understanding of the power of music to connect people to each other and to themselves. Through her work as a music therapist she has touched the lives of many individuals.

One of the individuals that Lisa works with is Tim, a young man with Asperger's syndrome and other developmental issues. He found Lisa Sandagata and the Music Therapy Institute just as he was graduating from his school program and facing the world as a young adult with special needs – a difficult time for anyone, but especially someone with special needs. Tim came to Lisa with a love of music and already developed skills on piano and organ. Music is an area in his life where he succeeds and touches others with his talent. Through their weekly sessions, Lisa has been able to support Tim in his musical and social development. The Music Therapy Institute was awarded a grant through the Kennedy Center's Mentoring in the Arts Program, which gave Tim an opportunity to work at the Conservatory, develop his resume and build his career in music. Tim is now music director and organist at a local church and an active member of the American Guild of Organists, which awarded him its Certificate of Service Playing after Tim successfully completed the Guild's required examination.

Lisa is not only a clinician she is also an administrator. As the director of outreach services for the Music Therapy Institute at the Music Conservatory of Westchester, she is the main point of contact for the more than twenty agencies in which the Music Therapy Institute provides services. She supervises a staff of six other music therapists and assists with writing grants and reports in an effort to find and maintain the much needed funding to support this not for profit program that serves approximately 2,000 people each year from pre-school children to the elderly. Though some agencies and individuals are able to pay for music therapy services there are many who rely on the support of grants through the county and state, or foundations and corporate funders. Even with the support that is given from outside funders, there are still individuals and program sites that are unable to receive music therapy services due to a lack of funding. Very often the funds are specified for a certain age group or disability. Many individuals with special needs begin to age out of funded programs so it can be more difficult for adults and elderly people to find support for these services. Lisa continues to advocate for music therapy. She has presented before the county board of legislators to educate them about the importance of music therapy and the needs of the children in the county and her efforts have resulted in two years of funding support for music therapy in special education settings throughout Westchester county. There are so many stories out there to be told and many individuals who are still waiting for their chance to be heard.



Tim works on an organ piece by Bach as Lisa listens.

A great deal of Lisa's workweek is spent at the Music Conservatory of Westchester's Music Therapy Institute. Here she will spend the day working with individual clients who come to this community based program for private music therapy sessions. The music therapy studio that Lisa works in is equipped with a piano, guitars, drums and a variety of small percussion instruments. Lisa arranges the instruments and the room for each person that she works with to maximize their involvement in the musical experience based on their interests and their needs. She is preparing for a session with Nat this morning. She remembers the work they have done together and how he has come to trust her. They have created some rituals that help Nat to feel safe, to warm up and then to more fully express himself in the music. She places two small chairs facing each other, one for her and one for Nat. She clears a space in the middle of the room for Nat to move and dance to the music. She remembers that for Nat, less is more.

Lisa hears the bubbly sounds of Nat's voice as he and his mother come down the hall to the music therapy room. Nat waves his hands and rocks his body with excitement to begin his music therapy session with Lisa. Nat was born with multiple disabilities and as a result has speech and language delays along with difficulties with neurological processing. He communicates mainly through gestures and signs using very few words. He takes his chair facing Lisa his knees touching hers as is their ritual and Lisa carefully places a guitar flat on top of both of their legs. She very gently plucks one string and sings a simple song for Nat welcoming him into the music. This one note song has become the doorway for Nat – the opening that gave him just enough support and just enough room to enter into this music making experience with Lisa. He sings with Lisa filling in words to finish phrases or simply sounding and humming along with her. As he begins to warm up Lisa increases the music's tempo and creates a fuller texture with the guitar and her voice. Nat slowly begins to move his arms and body to the music until he seems almost compelled to jump from his chair and dance around the room. He sees an image in the shiny surface of the piano and begins to dance with the boy reflecting back at him. His mother, Jill observes him quietly.





Nat loves to sing and dance with Lisa. He can become very animated.



Jill says “What I’ve learned from watching him in the music therapy session is that there’s something about music that he processes differently than he processes language and it opens up some pathway that allows him to really absorb it. He communicates through the music in a way he is not able to with spoken language. I watch just to see the joy on his face. The joy that he gets from music and the way the interaction is with Lisa. I’ve had tears in my eyes just because I don’t get to see that in other areas of his life – just this absolute pure joy at the experience.” It is often difficult to put into words the depths that can be reached during a music therapy session. How does one know that it is working? And yet the words of this mother resonate with richness of this therapeutic experience for her child.

