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## Make a note: Music can help you heal

*Whether it's listening to songs or playing an instrument, tunes can melt anxiety away.*

**By Allen Vaughan**

News-Leader

With Rituxan pumping into her veins at a CoxHealth cancer clinic, 83-year-old Joella Pierce reclined in a chair with her feet propped on an ottoman, covered by a blue blanket.

Suddenly, a familiar tune flooded the room, giving her lymphoma medicine much-needed company.

The petite, exhausted cancer patient had been given a break.

Mesmerized, her face was transformed into that of a young woman dancing to Frank Sinatra's "The Lady is a Tramp."

"This is one of my favorites," the 83-year-old Ozark resident said out loud in the recovery room while nodding her head back and forth. "It's real relaxing and it puts me in a different place."

The mood-setter: Harry Beckett, a lifelong musician, who has made a home in the Ozarks. Beckett's keyboard and voice have been an inspiration to Pierce and others during his volunteer work through the Music for Healing program at Cox.

Following trends nationwide, people across the Ozarks are starting to see results — physically and mentally — from incorporating music into their lives.

And as far as Pierce is concerned, the more variety the better.

"I like everything he plays," she said, after Beckett finished playing the theme to "Dr. Zhivago."

### Making patients smile

Beckett has wowed crowds in Branson with the



Facilitator Jim Hearn (right) leads a music-wellness class at Piano Craft in relaxation exercises. In this one, the students are told to fly like a bird. The class takes a total approach to health.

Edm• Rodriguez / News-Leader



Harry Beckett plays soothing music for patients, including Joella Pierce and Robert Laughlin, at CoxHealth's cancer center.

Edmee Rodriguez / News-Leader



Odessa Gifford claps for Harry Beckett, a musician who plays for Cox's Music for Healing program. Gifford was getting chemotherapy.

Edmee Rodriguez / News-Leader

Dixieland Jazz Band and has participated in the Springfield Opera.

Despite the accolades and the standing ovations at those performances, he said playing to crowds of one or two in a Cox hospital room has been the most rewarding experience.

"This has become my new life mission," Beckett said. "This is something I should have been doing my whole life.

"But then, my entire life has prepared me for this."

Beckett plays at Cox South once or twice a month, generally in the oncology and hematology office on South National Avenue. He also graces the psychiatric wards at Cox North weekly. Beckett began playing for the hospital system shortly after starting an entry-level post in the radiology department, about a year ago.

"I want to be able to touch people on a personal level," he said. "It's a culmination of what I've been doing my whole life. I can play the music that people want to hear and make them feel better."

Mostly Beckett sees patients becoming more relaxed and soothed, but at Cox North he sees something greater.

"We do group therapy while we play music. We do sing-alongs with rhythmic instruments and we do visualization activities," Beckett said. "It's amazing. Even the noncommunicative patients seem to open up.

"They might not show any emotion for weeks, but all of a sudden they're smiling, talking and standing up. It's remarkable."

While Beckett was serenading Pierce in the oncology and hematology recovery room, Odessa Gifford and Jo Scott were taking in the show from across the room.

"It's just entertaining," said the 61-year-old Gifford after receiving her last round of chemotherapy for breast cancer.

"It shows the hospital's desire to make you feel at home. You're not just here to get filled with toxic chemicals, you're here to get filled with hope."



Patient Joella Pierce enjoys listening to the music Harry Beckett plays at the cancer center. Edmee Rodriguez / News-Leader



Loretta Burke (left) and Neva Chapa form part of a music-wellness class at Piano Craft. The recreational music class for adults combines a program of tunes, breathing exercises and guided imagery. Edmee Rodriguez / News-Leader



Students use the red lights that appear on the keys of a Yamaha digital piano to guide them through a lesson at the Clavinova Connection class at Piano Craft in Springfield. Edmee Rodriguez / News-Leader

### On the Web

American Music Therapy Association: [www.musictherapy.org](http://www.musictherapy.org)

Yamaha site, which has background information about Clavinova Connection classes: [www.yamaha.com](http://www.yamaha.com)

"It shows the hospital's desire to make you feel at home. You're not just here to get filled with toxic chemicals, you're here to get filled with hope."

-- Odessa Gifford, cancer patient

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## Building a program

Cox's Music for Healing program was the brainchild of Martee Robinson, coordinator of the Complementary Alternative Medicine department.

After an oncology nurse decided to play keyboards and sing in the hospital, Robinson saw the potential. With music therapy gaining steam in medical circles, she grabbed the opportunity and ran with it.

"Most patients want to be uplifted," Robinson said. "It may not make huge improvements, but it just might soothe some of the anxiety that comes with cancer and other ailments."

She started with a handful of volunteers, and now has 15 musicians donating their time to the music initiative.

"The response has been great and as in most volunteer settings, our musicians feel the benefits while the patients do," Robinson said.

The musicians play for two hours at a time, volunteering when they're able. They also hold meetings once a month to divvy up days of the week.

Robinson said the program has been well-received throughout the hospital, especially in the neonatal units and cancer wards. Sometimes, musicians even play for patients' loved ones in waiting areas.

"The best part of the program is the musicians," Robinson said. "They have a feeling about their audience. They go to where their hearts tell them, with the music and where they play."

Cox is hoping the musicians can perform up to 400 hours in the upcoming year, estimating 550 patients will benefit. The current program features a dulcimer player, a violinist, a flutist, an acoustic guitar player, a harp player, keyboardists and vocalists.

Robinson's program is funded through an endowment. Each performer receives a small amount of money, enough to pay for gas and maybe lunch.

"It's not a lot of money, but if that's what we were looking for, we're in the wrong place anyway," said Beth LePage, a volunteer musician for Cox.

Karen Neely, director of nurses at the oncology and hematology department, has watched the program grow.

"When they take requests, the patients seem to light up," Neely said. "It not only makes the chemo more pleasant, but it breaks up the day. Some of these patients are here for a four to eight hours in a day."

Robinson is constantly seeking additional funding and exposure to expand the program. Her office is negotiating with nearby universities to involve student musicians, and she is working to introduce the Music for Healing program to other hospitals.

"This has gone over so well, we want to share with everybody."

## music therapists

There is a difference between just playing music to help people and being a music therapist.

Music therapy, a structured field, originated in the 1950s and has recently been gaining steam.

According to the American Music Therapy Association, music therapists assess clients' well-being, health and communication abilities through musical responses. These therapists design sessions for clients that may include listening to songs, writing lyrics, discussing lyrics and musical imagery, or performing music.

The AMTA says music therapists must complete approved college music therapy curriculum, then take an examination offered by a certification board.

"Music therapy is the prescribed use of music or activities to reach goals of the cognitive mind," said Teresa Kierczak, a music therapist with the Judevine Autism Center in Springfield. "Therapeutic music might help (patients), but it's not the same thing."

Robinson and Beckett know their goal isn't to change a patient's situation, but they want to ease the mind, which Kierczak said they can do.

"It can have a calming effect on behavior and lower an anxiety level," she said.

Patients surrounded by illness may find music to be a tool for escape, Kierczak said. "Everybody has ways of coping and music is a very popular method."

Kierczak said programs like Music for Healing might become integral parts of hospitals across the country.

"Some hospitals are already employing music therapists to aid in recovery," Kierczak said.

Meanwhile, people like Beckett are still doing what they love: "I'm not a therapist, I just want to help."

### **Making music**

With digitized birds chirping and soft piano keys chiming in the background, Ernie Kittleman extended her arms parallel to the ground.

Deep breaths and lengthy exhalations got her ready for the best part of her day — playing the piano.

"I just play the way I feel and I feel great," said Kittleman, who is recovering from kidney failure. "The music just makes me comfortable."

Kittleman and her seven classmates are taking part in an eight-week Clavinova Connection at Piano Craft on South Glenstone Avenue. The recreational music class for adults is designed to add wellness to participants' lives.

The sessions use Yamaha Clavinova digital pianos along with a program of music and wellness exercises, including breathing and guided imagery. Students' pianos are linked electronically to a teacher's instrument. The teacher uses a light system, found on all the pianos, to transmit cues to the group. The result: students play music from the very beginning.

"They definitely benefit from being in a group setting," said Shelley Wilson with Piano Craft. "They can focus on the smoothness of each motion and feel better, as well as feel the group going along with them."

The class is based on research by Dr. Barry Bittman, a neurologist from Pennsylvania with an interest in music. Wilson swears by Bittman's work, pointing out the following passage in his literature: "(This class) for the very first time redefines the process of music-making as a healthy lifestyle strategy along with exercise, nutrition and stress reduction."

Literature about the class also says research has shown that active music-making can lead to a strengthened immune system through increased levels of serotonin, melatonin and human growth hormone.

Students, who pay \$89 for the eight-week session, say the classes do relax them.

"It's a stress-management tool, that's for sure," said Joyce Bearden, 62, of Bois D'Arc.

### 'Play me one more'

As Blye Morris played the keyboard and LePage sang an assortment of songs at LaFon Dunford's bedside, the patient stopped eating his lunch. His arms dropped to his sides and he laid his head back against the pillow.

"That's beautiful, ladies," he praised as they concluded a tune. "Could you play 'Shenandoah'?"

Immediately they broke into a rendition of the classic and Dunford, who is recovering from lymphoma, appeared to drift away.

"This reminds me of my granddaughters," the 69-year-old Dunford said — his two granddaughters are musicians.

"Music is a big part of my life," the Rockaway Beach resident said. "I could listen to this all day."

The volunteers don't come by Dunford's recovery wing all the time, but he grabs them when he sees or hears them.

And they don't mind.

"It's truly healing through music," LePage said. "We always do our best to help them, because they certainly make us feel good."

As the women started to pack their materials up and move down the hall, Dunford, who was hoping to leave the hospital within the week, asked with a sly grin: "Ladies, could you play me one more?"

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