HEALING SOUNDS OF THE HARP

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*In hospitals and other settings where anxiety runs high, soothing music helps patients relax*

Lauren Decker, 2½, sits with her dad, Steve, in the waiting room of the radiology department at Massachusetts General Hospital while Joanne Cavatorta of Hingham plays the harp. Cavatorta is with GentleMUSES, a program that uses music to help soothe patients.

Laura Allen had little to smile about, fearful how her 5-day-old daughter would fare during heart surgery. But she brightened as she walked into the pediatric intensive care unit at Massachusetts General Hospital, where Joanne Cavatorta of Hingham was playing the harp.

‘‘It’s lovely and ethereal,’’ said Allen, of Boston’s Allston neighborhood, whose eyes welled with tears as she spoke. ‘‘It’s something special for the babies that someone thought enough to provide this music.’’

In hospital settings where anxiety and tension run high, Cavatorta and other harpists provide the kind of gift that can’t be found in a shop. Like a gentle touch, their soothing music helps anxious people relax.

‘‘It’s almost as if the music transports them into another space for awhile,’’ said Cavatorta, 63, who performs as part of GentleMUSES.

The 3-year-old program is offered by the Boston Conservatory of Music and HOPES, a Mass General cancer support program, that uses music to help people cope with illness.

‘‘The music provides a sense of peace, and you see people relax,’’ said Katie Binda, director of HOPES. ‘‘It brings a sense of calm to what people often feel is a crisis. The music changes the environment and makes (treatment) feel like a more human experience.’’

In a recent hospital survey of 182 adults, 87 percent said they felt more relaxed after hearing the music and 95 percent wanted to hear it again, Binda said.

Even the staff appreciate it.

‘‘When it’s busy here, it can be pretty chaotic, and the music seems to block out a lot of the chaos,’’ said Dawn McLoughlin of Rockland, a nurse in the pediatric intensive care unit.

Harp music has a long history. In the Bible, the harp is mentioned 58 times, said Cynthia Price-Glynn, chairwoman of the Boston Conservatory harp department and founding director of GentleMUSES. Now, it is the main instrument used for healing.

‘‘There is a huge movement of harp music being used therapeutically,’’ said Price-Glynn. ‘‘Some people say it’s a revival from ancient Greece. It has a lot to do with the open vibrations. They sort of bathe you in sound and swim through the entire room. And it’s such a graceful instrument to watch people play.’’

The 12 GentleMUSES range from Boston Conservatory students to retirees and come from as far away as Amherst. Each selects her own music, but gets ideas and support from fellow muses at a study group.

On a recent day, Cavatorta seated herself in a corner of the radiation treatment waiting room and gracefully plucked the strings of the lever harp.

Across from her, Steve Decker of Ashland rocked and crooned to his bright-eyed 2½ year-old daughter, Lauren, her head smooth from cancer treatment. Squirming with the normal energy of a toddler, Lauren kept looking at Cavatorta.

‘‘She likes to watch it and it’s soothing,’’ said Decker.

The waiting room is an all-too-familiar place for cancer patients, who often receive daily treatments over many weeks. They come from all over the state and country, leaving behind family and friends.

‘‘I was surprised when I heard it,’’ said Joy Price of Spokane, Wash., who was undergoing treatment for a brain tumor. ‘‘It’s wonderful. I just love the harp.’’

Bill Bourgeois comes from West Roxbury.

‘‘Waiting is tough when you’re getting treatment,’’ he said. ‘‘If you hear something that takes your mind off of the process, that’s a plus.’’

As Cavatorta plays Celtic tunes and improvises harmonic progressions at heartbeat rhythm, people respond to her technique as well as the immediacy of the sound.

‘‘Even people who don’t hear well like to watch it,’’ Cavatorta said. ‘‘There’s something pretty about fingers on a harp.’’

After an hour in the waiting room, Cavatorta quietly wheels the harp, provided by Mass General, into the neonatal intensive care unit, where nurse Diana Grobman enthusiastically greets her.

‘‘We love it,’’ Grobman said as she directed Cavatorta to a corner near the sickest infants.

Grobman said the music helps babies. She points to three monitors that indicate a small rise in the babies’ oxygen levels since the harp music began.

Cavatorta, who learned to play the harp at age 50, also plays monthly for patients at Weymouth Health Care nursing home and Brockton Hospital. But it is her biweekly volunteer work with the GentleMUSES that most inspires her, particularly in the intensive care units.

GentleMUSES hopes to expand to other hospitals, as well as to bring in guitar and voice. Recently, the program hired a director of development to raise funds for additional harps, which each cost about $2,500, and to conduct studies.

‘‘Research is an area we’re excited about,’’ said Price-Glynn. ‘‘People say we have such a wonderful effect, and now we want to measure it.’’