

# More than a Favorite Song: Music Therapy Brings Sense of Connection to Veterans

If you visit Ainsworth Hall at the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King on a Wednesday, there's a chance you'll hear Elvis Presley's voice spilling out into the hallway from the Namaste room. If not Elvis, it's likely that polka or opera will be playing through the speakers.

"One member, in particular, really likes folk music," said King volunteer Chris Spreda. "He seems to really enjoy that old song 'She'll Be Coming 'Round the Mountain,' so we try to play that for him."

The songs are part of the music therapy program at King, which can also include activities like drumming, games, guided relaxation, movement, instrument playing, song writing, discussion and sensory stimulation. Sessions can be one-on-one or as part of a group, and members with differing cognitive and physical levels can participate in the groups together.

Group sessions in the memory care unit typically start with a welcome song that incorporates each member's name. Sometimes the activities include tossing a ball back and forth, other times the session centers on a theme for the day, maybe an upcoming holiday or the leaves changing color in the fall—but there's always music involved.

"Some of the members, they may not speak much at first," said Spreda, who has given her time and talent to the music therapy program for more than four years. "But something about music will get them to start singing along and tapping their toes and you can see they're smiling and happy."

Music can spark memories and members will often remember songs from

their childhood, mostly religious hymns or nursery rhymes. But Spreda recalls a specific day when music therapist Jeanne Kirk, MSE, MT-BC was leading a conversation about summer, the lake just outside the walls of the veterans home and fishing trips that would be happening once the weather turned warmer.

A typically quiet member began singing an old song about fishing. "He sang the whole song and we just were really thrilled that he remembered that song and that it meant a lot to him," she said.

Other days are more hands on, with members tapping out rhythms on a drum. Kirk, the music therapist, invites the group to join her, pulling each chair or wheelchair up to the big drum. For members who have experienced memory loss, creating music together on the drum provides an opportunity for a shared experience, working together and laughing together.

"The biggest part of music therapy is to get a connection, and working together on the drum is a great way to do it," said Kirk. "You get them to actively participate and work together to form a rhythm."

While many of us enjoy music, and members at King do as well, music therapists like Jeanne Kirk say that music therapy is far more than listening to a favorite song. Music therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional, according to the American Music Therapy Association, and it's an important part of medical care at the



Jeanne Kirk

Wisconsin veterans homes.

Both therapist Jeanne Kirk and volunteer Chris Spreda have seen first-hand the effect music therapy can have on someone. Kirk remembers a day that a member was having an especially bad day. "He was acting out and just really having a hard time getting settled down," she said. "I knew he used to play in a band, so I took him back to my office and got out my instruments. He went from this really agitated state to laughing and having a good time. The whole incident was forgotten."