

A song for healing: music therapists bring harmony to the hearts of the people they help

Laura Daily

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

If music is the universal language, then music therapist Julie Guy can speak to the whole world.

Guy, 32, owns The Music Therapy Center of California, which specializes in bringing music therapy services to special-needs children, teens, and older adults in the San Diego area. Music therapy helps people with emotional, cognitive, physical, and social problems as they interact with, make, and respond to music. Career World caught up with Guy between therapy sessions to discuss the ins and outs of this lyrical career.

Career World: What does a music therapist do?

Julie Guy: We use music to do nonmusic things. For instance, we help disabled children with academic skills or help adults cope with pain or memory loss. Think of music therapy as another medical treatment or communication tool. Therapists determine a goal--such as learning to count or brushing teeth--and use singing, songwriting, movement, and/or listening to music to meet that goal. Each [therapist] has her own specialty. Some may work with teens; others, with seniors. My company specializes in children with autism.

CW: Why did you decide to become a music therapist?

JG: I loved music and volunteering.... One day [in high school] I found a description of music therapy in a career booklet. There were only four sentences, but I knew this is what I wanted to do: combine music with helping people.

[ILLUSTRATIONS OMITTED]

CW: Do you play an instrument?

JG: I have played flute since sixth grade--I was in marching band and community orchestra.... Music therapy majors must study the basics, like biology, psychology, and counseling, plus have a strong music background because your degree is really in music. In order to study music therapy, you have to audition with the music department, just like a music major, to get in. Then besides your main instrument you also have to become proficient on piano and guitar. I've even learned to write songs on the spot--you put new words to a familiar tune; it's called piggyback writing--thanks to my business partner who's a real songwriter.

CW: What's a typical day like for you?

JG: Wow! Every day is different. I may have two hours of meetings or catch up on paperwork, pay the bills, and do presentations at hospitals and schools. About 75 percent of my time is spent serving clients. I work in our clinic, in client homes, and in nursing homes/retirement communities. I have as many as eight sessions in one day. In fact, I'd guess I drive 2,000 miles a month! Then after each session, I have to write up my notes--what goals did we meet, how is the client progressing, what did he say--just like a doctor filling out a medical chart.

CW: What's your favorite kind of music?

JG: Most people assume I'm a fan of classical, but I really love alternative music groups like James Blunt, the White Stripes, and Coldplay.

CW: Can you share some success stories?

JG: There have been so many ... one little girl with some developmental disabilities never washed her hands after going to the

bathroom. So we wrote a song about hand washing and incorporated the steps for washing hands. We sang and practiced the steps until she started to [wash] on her own.

John had a stroke in December 2006, which left him unable to both understand people talking and to speak. When I first met him, the only thing he could do in our therapy sessions was to finish humming the melody of a familiar song that I started singing. Through the use of special music therapy techniques, he is now able to imitate sounds and one-syllable words. We have used music to help him relearn simple commands and skills like how to shower and dry himself off. His best friend told me, "This is the happiest I have seen him since his stroke. Can you come every day? This is great."

CW: Why did you open your own business?

JG: I wanted to be in control of my hours and pick a range of clients. In the morning, I can work with a 12-year-old boy with cerebral palsy who can't walk, talk, or eat on his own but can play a drum or tambourine with his foot or knee. Then maybe I'm off to my clavivona [electronic keyboard] classes at a senior retirement community. One of the residents, Howard, who had no musical background at all, learned within three years to master the instrument in his late 70s. Now he plays several times a week in the dining room entertaining crowds. I love that every day is different and challenging. It's my career and my avocation.

CW: Any advice for a future music therapist?

JG: Find out as much as you can about the profession beforehand. Do volunteer work. Take as many music lessons as you can on any instrument (or voice), plus guitar and piano. And listen to as much music as you can. This is one time the folks can't razz you for being plugged in to your iPod.

Music Therapist: THE FACTS

Training: A bachelor's degree in music therapy, plus internship and a national certification administered by the Certification Board for Music Therapists. Empathy, patience, creativity, imagination, and openness to new ideas are important qualities. Because music therapists are musicians as well as therapists, a love of music is a given. Salary range: Overall average salary for music therapists nationwide is \$43,937. Salaries range from \$18,000 to \$150,000.

Outlook: Excellent. Music therapists are employed in general and psychiatric hospitals, community mental health agencies, rehabilitation centers, daycare facilities, nursing homes, and schools. Nearly 1.5 million people received music therapy services in 2005, says the American Music Therapy Association.

HOT LINK:

Visit www.musictherapy.org for more career information. Learn more about Julie Guy's practice at www.themusictherapycenter.com.

Classroom Extension

- * Before reading the article, ask students what they may already know about the profession of music therapy.
- * Julie Guy describes her job as using "music to do nonmusic things." What does she mean by that?
- * What are some good ways to prepare for this career?
- * What do you think the rewards and challenges of this career might be?
- * Have students connect to the career by talking about how making music and listening to different kinds of music makes them feel.

Resources

- * American Music Therapy Association www.musictherapy.org

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