

## Music therapy: for heart and mind

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by YUKIE KURAHASHI

Wendy Watts was well on her way to becoming a concert pianist when she changed her mind. -I was training for a degree in music, but I had always wanted to be either a counsellor or social worker," she said. -So I thought music therapy was a good combination: using my music to help people."

Wendy Watts Music Therapist George Derby Centre Chief Steward / OH&S Steward
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Watts is a music therapist at George Derby Centre, a bright and airy long term care facility for veterans. In the sunlit lobby, elderly residents take turns at a pool table; some residents, obviously experts, sink balls, while faint calls can be heard from the purpose-built bingo hall just beyond.

As Watts makes her way through the lobby, a resident half-rises from a chair to greet her. Others smile and nod. Its evident that she and the work she performs provide a key ingredient in the lively, inviting atmosphere at this residence.

Watts describes music therapy as the skilled use of music to bring about well-being. Because she works with a wide range of skill and awareness levels among residents, she tailors the way she works closely to the ability of each resident ... sometimes from moment to moment. -I run groups, and individual sessions," she said. -I have different styles of programming. Some are education oriented ... like our combo, where we learn songs, rehearse them, and work on the actual performance. Thats very structured."

The combo, formed in 1995, is made up of approximately 10 residents who perform on special occasions for the other residents at the facility, as well as at other facilities in the Lower Mainland. The combo has recorded a CD, with grants from the Canadian Association of Music Therapy and the volunteer association at George Derby Centre.

-The volunteer association has been very supportive of this band We were able to hire an engineer to come in. He set up microphones and we put up signs asking everyone to be quiet, and we did it all in two hours! Then he took the recordings and mixed the CD," Watts said. The CD has become a hit with residents, their families, and members of the Legion, as well as with volunteers at the Centre.

Watts said some of the members bring a lifetime of musical experience, and she seems to relish working with residents to overcome challenges. -One difficulty has been working with people with severe visual impairment, because we depend on reading lyrics," she said. -But even that, we can work around. Thats one part of being a music therapist ... to try and find ways to empower the residents and meet them wherever they are with their skills.

-For those with visual impairments, I use very large-print music, or in some cases I try to get them to hum the music or play an instrument instead ... always checking to make sure they're not getting frustrated. One resident is not able to sing, but he enjoys coming and he participates by playing instruments, and sometimes even mouthing the words."

At the other end of the spectrum, Watts has a very different approach for residents who might be agitated or distracted. -Sometimes we work on promoting socialization and eye contact, providing stimulation, and reducing agitation with those residents who have dementia or psychiatric dementia," she said. -But within that there's a continuum. I do small group sessions on our special care ward ... socialization is the main goal.

-On our special care ward, some residents are non-verbal, very distracted, and very sleepy ... or looking at everything going by and not connected to the group. So music is a great way of drawing them in, and eye contact is a major goal with some people," she said.

-Awareness of each other is another thing that I work on ... in trying to get Jim to say hello to Jack, or shake hands, for example. If a resident asks another resident a question within a special care group, that's an amazing success, because a lot of times they might initiate interaction with me but not with each other," she said. -So my job is to try to get them to be aware of each other ... to share instruments, pass objects around the group, and I use music as a tool to help me do that. It creates a container where these people can actually communicate for an hour."

Watts admits that working with such a wide range of personalities can be a challenge in itself. -Some residents are so charged by being involved in music that they come by my office four or five times a day with copies of music they'd like to learn. It's nice that they feel comfortable that they can pop in," she said. -The rapport is such an important part of music therapy."

She praises the administration at George Derby Centre for recognizing the many therapeutic effects of her work. -There's been a lot of research backing up what we've found ... that music therapy can be effective when other forms of therapy aren't as effective. It can be effective in bringing about socialization and communication, reducing agitation ... and some people don't need to have as much medication if they're involved in music therapy," she said. -I think there are also studies showing that residents sleep better, too."

Watts began training as a classical pianist, but switched to the music therapy program at Capilano College. -I always enjoyed the interactive part of performing for people; I never really liked the very formal concert atmosphere," she said.

Watts released a solo CD earlier this year, of pieces she wrote and composed. She has a confident, clear voice, with hints of sweet smoke in the lowest octave ... and she accompanies herself on the piano with a clean, deft touch. It's easy to see (and hear) why her music therapy program continues to be such a popular success with residents.

George Derby Centre is home to approximately 300 war veterans, most of whom are men. As both chief steward and occupational health and safety steward, Watts said this can present interesting occupational health issues for staff.

-Besides the big issues, like musculo-skeletal injuries, a lot of things contribute to workload," she said. -But it feels good to be contributing to trying to make a home for the residents.

-I like the fact that my job forces me to be creative. I have to be thinking of new things, and new ways to reach people through music," Watts said.

-I love the fact that I'm able to make music every day as part of my job."

*The George Derby Combos recently released CD, Our Greatest Hits, is available for \$10. Contact [wendyw@gderby.bc.ca](mailto:wendyw@gderby.bc.ca) for more information. Wendy Watts solo debut CD, Living Fiction, is available at the Chapters store on Broadway at Granville. Outside the lower mainland, contact [wendywatts68@hotmail.com](mailto:wendywatts68@hotmail.com) to place an order.*

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180 East Columbia  
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website  
[www.hsabc.org](http://www.hsabc.org)

Telephone 604-517-0994  
1-800-663-2017