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THE JI TELLS IT LIKE IT IS. SOMEBODY HAS TO.

A musical massage

HARP PROVIDES MUSIC FOR THE MIND AND BODY

By David Huck
Journal Inquirer

Eight years ago, when West Suffield resident and psychologist Marcie Swift was battling cancer, she found solace by resting her head against the bridge of her harp, soaking in the musical vibrations as she played.

Another source of strength was the lake near her home where she learned to overcome her fear of uncertainty as she explored the water on her kayak.

"It's filled with water lilies that smell of vanilla and great blue herons and red-winged black birds," Swift says, going on to describe the dragonflies that surrounded her yellow boat. "I've had a lot of mystical connections with that place. It's been very much a healing haven for me."

She now draws from those experiences, sharing her music with everyone from young children to adults who are dealing with depression, anxiety, stress, insomnia, chronic pain, or other ailments. It is a musical journey that relaxes the mind and speeds recovery. She calls it a "musical massage."

The harp has been used for thousands of years in almost every culture, from Ireland to Egypt and China, with its healing powers documented in religion, art, and literature. In the Bible, the shepherd David played his harp for King Saul to soothe him of his rage and despair.

"There is something innately healing about the vibrations," Swift says. "It's heavenly, and there's nothing quite like it."

She uses her harp to perform deeply resonant and soothing musical passages in her own private practice, at area hospitals, in assisted living homes, and at local support group meetings. Listening to music, often coupled with guided imagery and meditation, for as little as 10 minutes has reaped positive benefits, she says.

Studies have shown that harp therapy can slow down brain waves, boost endorphin levels, regulate stress-related hormones, improve the respiratory system, reduce muscle tension, stimulate digestion, and improve body movement by relaxing the muscles.

Swift said research also shows that playing to premature babies for 15 minutes after they are born encourages them to drink more of their mother's milk, resulting in a faster departure from the hospital.

Swift did her graduate work at Temple University and went on to become a school psychologist in Camden, N.J., working with students who were dealing with sleep problems, learning dis-



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Marcie Swift, West Suffield psychologist

abilities, attention deficit disorders, and test-taking anxiety. At the time, she began creating personalized cassettes for the students that contained story telling and guided imagery of their favorite places, such as a vacation spot, to help them cope. Swift says the students who listened to the tape before bed or when stressed were able to sleep better.

It was 13 years ago, while vacationing with friends on Mount Desert Island in Maine, that Swift became hooked on the harp in a Celtic music shop. Inside, a woman sat in the middle of the room playing the "Titanic" theme song on a harp. The tone immediately drew her in.

"I just sort of melted and fell in love with the instrument," says Swift, who purchased the Seattle-made, 36-string walnut and spruce harp two weeks later.

Her experiences playing piano since age 3 helped her to quickly learn the new instrument. She now has four harps, including a lap version that she brings on visits to area hospitals. Swift studied musical therapy in a program called Music for Healing and Transition that focuses on using the harp, guitar, and piano to help people recovering from surgery, and provide relief for terminally ill patients. Coming from a traditional psychology background, she says, she was skeptical of the health claims at first.

"They train you in a way that really fosters deep relaxation. It

even changes the immune system to function better," Swift said.

Swift did her musical internship training at the McLean health center in Simsbury, a rehabilitation and assisted living center. While there she played for a group of four women, one of whom hadn't said a word in weeks. After playing her harp, Swift found a staff member nearby in tears.

"I looked over my shoulder and the nurse was crying, and I asked her why. The nurse said: 'This woman has been with us for three months and has never spoken — she's a stroke victim,'" Swift says. "Music can do that."

Also during that time period, Swift worked at Hartford Hospital with patients recovering from hip and knee replacements. She would ask them what their pain and stress levels were on a scale of one to 10.

"Invariably they would say '10 and 10'. So I would play for them and invariably they would say 'zero and one,'" Swift says. "Then I became a believer."

Swift says not everyone will respond to music therapy.

"There are many ways to get to the same place. Just as though people who are going through cancer treatment seek out massage or Reiki, other people respond really well to the harp and music," Swift says. "I think there has to be a general attitudinal receptivity

Inside



► LIVING

GOOD VIBRATIONS

Marcie Swift of West Suffield is following thousands of years of history with her harp. "There is something innately healing about the vibrations," she says.

Page 21

A musical massage

■ HARP

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

to begin with."

Swift says it's difficult to pinpoint exactly why music can have such a overwhelming change, but she is certain the change goes right down to the human body's molecular cells. In another example, Swift says she once gave a workshop for a group of nurses. She asked them to take their blood pressure and then would play her harp for five to 10 minutes. The nurses' blood pressures all dropped by 20 or 30 points she said.

Swift plays original and Celtic compositions, depending on the patient. For hospice patients, for example, she plays rhythm-heavy pieces that slows down their breathing and put them in a much more relaxed state. For someone who is leaving a facility, she plays more triumphant songs, like a march. For

many of her patients, Swift records her harp overlaid with guided imagery meant to provoke positive thoughts. During her own struggle with cancer, she says she would envision the fibers of her body overcoming the disease.

Swift is now working at Hartford Hospital with patients who have had chemotherapy. She says they have reduced their feeling of fatigue and nausea after listening to her play. Swift has also performed in waiting areas to ease the minds of nurses and family members during stressful times.

As a former psychologist for the independent Renbrook School in West Hartford and an adjunct professor at the University of Hartford, Swift says she has finally found what she enjoys most after seeing the change it brings to people. "Everyone always wants to touch the harp. It has a lot of mystical connotations and