

The Gift of Music

How music was gifted to a group of Elders and the way it changed their lives

by Pamela Charach | Photos by Ken Villeneuve



Music to Remember

When the founder of the charity, Rick's Heart Foundation, saw his father in a care home with his head leaned over to the side, unengaged and quite frankly, bored, he knew he needed to do something to help. How could he bring more quality of life to his aging dad? Everything changed when he saw the film *Alive Inside*, a documentary showcasing the power of music for seniors. He knew then exactly what to do.

The charity founder returned to his father's care home and placed headphones over his dad's ears. Just as the documentary showed, the results were astounding. His dad came to life – his eyes lit up as his head left his shoulder. Alert with the memories that the songs resurfaced, the man in the care home became engaged in the present by remembering the past.

It was this experience that drove Rick's Heart Foundation to call Kinsmen Lodge, a non-profit, complex care home for Elders in Surrey. He offered a large donation that would allow them to implement a music program – the Heart for Music program.

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The Pilot Project

Leisa Bannerman, the former Director of Recreation and Volunteer Services at Kinsmen Lodge, was surprised to receive a phone call from Rick's Heart Foundation in November 2018. She recalled, "It started in a really neat way. I got a call and was told that the founder of Rick's Heart Foundation had watched *Alive Inside* and learned about using headphones with Elders so they could listen to personalized playlists. It touched his heart and he said, 'I just have to make this happen for not-for-profit care homes.' We were the first one he called."

The Music Therapist at Kinsmen Lodge,

Sheila Harry, and the chaplain, Pastor Lorie Buffam, researched the best approach to implementing the Heart for Music program and designed a system that their studies showed would work. They ordered wireless, noise-cancelling headphones and iPods, installed cabinets to store supplies and began making personalized playlists for each Elder in the care home based on their individual music preferences. The project was underway!

Sheila Harry, BMus, MTA, was particularly excited about the project. With a smile showing how much this program means to her, she explained, "I believe in the power of music. It brings people out of themselves. It brings them alive in a really special way and is a connector. When you play music together, your body releases oxytocin, which is a bonding hormone. Your brain is hardwired to make memories with music."

Reflecting on her almost 10 years of experience as a Music Therapist, she continued, "People in this stage of life might not feel like they are useful anymore. They've lost ability and can't do many of the things they used to. Maybe their identity was in what they could do and now they've lost that part

of their identity. Music brings people back to who they were."

The Results

Prior to the Heart for Music program, Sheila spent every available minute she had ensuring she was bringing joy to as many Elders as she could by using the power of music. She played guitar, she sang and she took requests. However, Sheila is only one person in a home with

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almost 160 Elders. This is why the Heart for Music program is so groundbreaking. It gives Elders the opportunity to listen to the music they love even when the Music Therapist is unavailable. It gives Elders the opportunity to change their mood with music at any time.

Sheila was excited to share one of the most powerful experiences she has had with the Heart for Music program. "There was a woman with Alzheimer's and she was confused, agitated and upset. She didn't want to eat. Dinner was in front of her, but she wouldn't touch it. We were starting to get concerned." Sheila continued, happy to be sharing such a beautiful story, "I sat next to her at the dinner table and started to play a song I knew she loved. She sang along. I played another. She sang more! Two songs in, she says, 'That looks good!' She pulled her plate towards herself and ate. It changed her mood. She wasn't fearful about where she was, she was just enjoying the moment."

The woman with Alzheimer's has since become a big fan of using the headphones and the staff at Kinsmen Lodge are thrilled to have found a way to bring comfort to someone who was previously distressed.

For Elders with Alzheimer's, even if their confusion or anxiety returns, the good mood that the music brought about can still linger. Giving Elders the autonomy to craft their own playlist, to make something tailored to their individuality in a space where choices may be limited, is empowering. As Sheila described, "This is one simple way we can make something personalized and special – something that they feel is theirs."

Heart for Music in Action

Seeing the Elders at Kinsmen Lodge enjoy their personalized playlists is truly a sight to see. James, an Elder who



Karyn Young is thrilled with the joy that the Heart for Music program has brought to the Elders at Kinsmen Lodge



Leisa Bannerman was surprised to receive a call from Rick's Heart Foundation, and couldn't be happier with the outcome

enjoys the program, reminisced, "I listen to Elvis and John Denver. I like rock and roll. I used to be in a band years ago, the 70s. It was great." As James finished his thought, something amazing happened. He started to hum an Elvis hit, *Burning Love*, and just like that, James and three other Elders erupted in chorus, "I'm just a hunk, a hunk of burnin' love!" As they concluded their song, another Elder, Leona, exclaimed, "The oldies, I love the oldies!"

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James' son, Scott, shared his feelings about the Heart for Music program and the effect it has had on his dad's quality of life, "Music is a huge part of his life, and I think it's like that for many people. It builds happiness and gives people a reason to be positive. Listening to the old music he listened to growing up helps bring him back to a special time. It's pretty cool."

For the staff at Kinsmen Lodge, seeing the outcomes has been amazing. Karyn Young, the Heart for Music Coordinator, meets with the Elders or their family members to help curate their custom playlists. Thinking back to a time when she saw an Elder, June, listening to her

playlist for the first time, Karyn smiled, "I asked her, 'June, would you like some music?' I put the headphones on her and about one minute in, she said, 'This is just awesome! This is beautiful.'" Reflecting on this special moment, Karyn continued, "She was beside herself. I was so happy because I walked away that day feeling like I'd done my job. That response... it makes it worth it. It makes me feel like I chose the perfect field."

Magic

The Heart for Music program is brilliant in its simplicity. In a stage of life when Elders have lost much of their independence and ability, why not give them something that is uniquely their own? With the program, Elders are reminded of their most important moments in life. As Karyn explained, "It draws out their memories. I've seen it happen. Some Elders with Alzheimer's or dementia rarely respond, but when we put the headphones on, they sing every word."

Music has the power to convey what words cannot. The song you sang with your dad as he introduced you to his record collection. With your mom when she taught you how to cook. The song you and your siblings choreographed. The song you and your best friends

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would sing at the top of your lungs. The song that played at your wedding. The song you sang at the hospital bed. The songs that played as the most important moments of your life passed by.

Music is a language we can all speak. Regardless of age, gender, ability or where you are from, it can make you laugh. It can make you cry. It can make you remember.

In the words of Chris Harrison, the current Director of Recreation and Volunteer Services at Kinsmen Lodge, "The program is magic."



Sheila Harry, BMus, MTA, playing songs from an Elder's personally curated playlist