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Woman Faces Dread of Cancer With Music Therapy, Finds Healing and Hope

BY MIMI NGUYEN LY | March 30, 2019 Updated: April 8, 2019

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NEW YORK—Maria Logis thought she was going to have singing lessons, but she ended up visiting a [music therapist](#). She didn't know what [music therapy](#)

was, and she didn't know she would discover in it a path to healing and hope. It was the fall of 1994. Logis, then in her mid-50s, had just been diagnosed with [cancer](#)—stage four non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. She had visited six oncologists one after another, who all agreed she needed chemotherapy.

“That was my situation when I was praying for guidance from God,” she said.

She recalled thinking: “You know, God, it's really okay with me to die, I really don't mind ... But please keep me out of the hands of the doctors—not with tubes and months and months of suffering.”

Logis, of Greek Orthodox faith, prayed for the strength to endure whatever was to come. When she prayed, she kept hearing a voice that seemed out of place.

“This little voice kept saying, ‘Mhm, why don't you sing? Maybe you want to sing,’” Logis said.

At the time, Logis was the general manager of human resources at Con Edison, New York City's electric company. She had no musical background and deemed the idea of singing “completely insane.” But, with some encouragement from her sister, she decided to see it

through.

She was at her dentist and told him about seeking singing lessons. He suggested the name of a music therapist at the [Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy](#) at New York University.

Connecting Through Music

Having wound up in music therapy [two and a half months after](#) her cancer diagnosis, Logis found herself laughing for the first time.

“It was fun,” she [said of the first session](#). “I was in such a state of worry and anxiety and fear and despair that laughing for even a few minutes helped to break this terrible black cloud that I was under.”

When she returned the following week, she did not laugh at all.

“I cried and cried and cried. I let out my feelings of being afraid of doctors and treatments,” [she said](#).

Logis sang, and the music therapist, Alan Turry, responded by playing the piano. Both were improvising. Through music, Turry tried to convey empathy and encouraged her to explore her inner-self further.

“Somehow he’s understanding me and I’m understanding him on a level that I wouldn’t be able to express verbally, but it’s happening musically,” Logis said, reflecting on the process.

As the weekly sessions progressed, Logis went deeper. She sang about cancer. She sang about her relationship with her mother. She sang about her struggle to hold on to hope, and sang about other parts of her life. She sang about lighthearted topics, too.

“The therapy process involves so much listening on his part,” Logis said of Turry’s role. “What he’s communicating through music is ‘What you think and what you feel are important’—There are no words, right? And in fact, those words would feel a little trivial.”

Emotional and Physical Healing

A few weeks into music therapy, in January 1995, Logis's CT scans showed her lymph nodes had shrunk, and her doctor decided to delay treatment for a month. A month later, the lymph nodes were the same, and chemotherapy was delayed again by two months. After a few more follow-ups, the lymphoma was declared to be in spontaneous remission.

In 2008, Logis was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. Today, she is in remission from both cancers, and while she needed surgery on her thyroid, she never had to undergo chemo or radiation for her lymphoma.

Logis attributes her recovery from lymphoma to a variety of factors—and said music therapy certainly helped.

“Through music therapy, I was able to express my feelings, to become aware of the source of my pain, and to take action to make a new life for myself,” [Logis wrote](#) in an article in the journal *Music and Medicine* in 2011.

Today, Logis continues music therapy but with a focus on creating new music as an artist. She has written and performed several shows, and is striving to become more professional as a singer-songwriter.

Turley said he wasn't aiming to address Logis's illness.

“It was my intention to help her to process and feel what was going on for her, discover what was going on and try to help her make meaning and discover creative aspects of herself,” he said.

“There are some studies that show how a release of emotions can help your physical state, but I don't make any claims that music therapy cured of her cancer. But I do think it helped her to be more integrated with her feelings and less restricted,” he said.

Achieving Non-Musical Goals With Music

In the ancient world, music was often considered a form of medicine. Apollo, for example, was the god of both healing and music. Plato declared that melody and rhythm could restore the soul. In the Chinese language, the character for music is the base of [the](#)

Character for Medicine.

The use of music as a form of therapy, however, has been around for only about 70 years. It has since proven to be a remarkable evidenced-based modality. The American Music Therapy Association describes music therapy as the use of music to help a person achieve certain goals based on their needs, carried out by a credentialed music therapist.

The goals are never purely musical, and may be the same as goals for other forms of therapy. For example, the goal could be to increase communication in a child who has autism. Other goals may include promoting wellness, improving memory, alleviating pain, promoting physical rehabilitation, and managing stress.

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Our Innate Connection to Music

Turry took on the position of Managing Director of the Nordoff-Robbins Center in 2006. Music therapists at the Center trace their practice to the pioneering work of composer and pianist Paul Nordoff, and his collaborator, special educator Clive Robbins. Starting in the mid-1950s, the pair worked with developmentally disabled children.

Their approach, among a number of other approaches under the umbrella of music therapy, is dubbed “Nordoff-Robbins music therapy” or “creative music therapy.” Today, Nordoff-Robbins facilities can be found in Australia, England, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, Korea, Scotland, and the United States. The approach is grounded in the idea that every person has an innate sensitivity to music that can be harnessed to help their personal growth and development.

“We have a heartbeat, we have a rhythm in the way we walk, we have the rhythm in the cycles of our neural connections,” Turry said. “We are built to be responsive to sound, to music, and the role the task of the music therapist is to find how you can engage with somebody’s potentials through musical interactions.”

Today, the center sees a wide range of people. Turry said that about 60 percent of the clients are children with developmental delays, most are diagnosed with autism. People in

geriatric care, or people with medical conditions—including those who have had strokes or brain injury—are also referred here. There are also adults like Maria who self-refer, seeking in music therapy an alternative approach to verbal psychotherapy.

Individualized Approach

Turley said the Nordoff-Robbins approach encourages engagement on the part of the client.

“We might give them a drum or a scale that we’ve set up certain notes or encourage somebody to start to make sounds,” he said.

“When you engage with somebody, you have to be careful not to prescribe,” he explained. “You don’t want to say, ‘If I play this, somebody’s gonna feel that,’—it’s not cause-and-effect. You want to discover with your client the meaning of the music and what music can do [for them].”

Each session is recorded for the music therapist to reflect on how the client took to the music. The recordings are also later used for clinical research.

“We want to be careful to really look at what’s happening for that person and study the sessions outside, make a plan, sometimes we compose music for the clients,” he said.

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“What [kind of] music should I bring back here that can possibly be effective in helping the person develop a full sentence or to help the person stay focused? The therapist is studying and then making a plan so that each session allows you to build on the next session.”

When Turley reflected on the sessions with Maria, he said there were times of challenge.

“I think for Maria there were times when she felt ‘is there anything left, haven’t we done it all.’ It was this faith that we both took in allowing the process to unfold,” he said. “And music is so wide, it’s as wide as all the feelings that we have. Music can relate to all of that.”

“It was really the right vehicle, the right medium for her to hold on to her hope,” he said.

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