

Video Transcript: Musical Healing

Penny Brill, Viola, Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra:

I got started with the Music and Wellness Program when I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1999 and there was a long period of time where there was—the diagnosis phase was about three months, and I went through a lot of surgeries, so I decided because I was concerned about and fearful of some of the procedures, I thought, well let's try music and see whether it makes a difference. So I tried music while I was waiting and found that it reduced my anxiety while I was waiting for test results, and then during surgery I played music and it reduced the amount of pain medications I needed, and I recovered faster than they [doctors] were used to seeing and [they] wanted to know what I was doing.

So I thought, 'Why isn't there music in the hospital? Why aren't people using this as a tool?' Because we all listen to music of one sort or another, this would be an easy thing for people to use in the hospital, and if it really improves their experience in the hospital, let's get people using it. So, I actually found out then that there was a music therapy program at Duquesne University and it had been going for 25 years (by now it's 35 or 40 years), and so I began to meet with various music therapists to find out about what kind of research had been done, and who was around, and what their skills were.

And so I decided I would start playing in Montefiore Hospital and in Magee-Womens Hospital and bring a music therapist with me and kind of show people what would happen if we started doing this. And Bruce Rabin, whose wife is on our board, was head of the Healthy Lifestyles program, and he was very supportive, so actually, he helped with funding the music therapists as they came in with me. And so I did kind of a musical sit in two days a week for nine months, and during that time I think I was on television 19 times. So, we got a lot of footage of what we were doing, got a lot of comments from patients, and then we met with a couple of foundations and they funded two music therapy positions, and so then the program kind of proceeded from there. We did presentations before concerts at Heinz Hall. We did presentations kind of all over Pittsburgh for nurses, for religious groups, just showing people how music would help them with their goals and kind of improve their experiences in preventive health, as well as stress reduction, pain reduction, things like that.

What my goal was in starting this program was to show people how something that was around them, something they had in their living room, something simple, could help—in very significant ways help them have a better experience when they were going through traumatic times or stressful times. And I think rather quickly we were able to show people that this was a tool that they would want to use and got people excited about the idea. Since I believed in it, it was easy for me to keep going with it and promote it, and foundations agreed with me, so we were able to develop the program over a period of time.