

The Drum Circle at The Arbors of Bedford: A Joyful and Therapeutic Community Music Making Experience for those with Cognitive Impairment

By Ami Sarasvati

Seeing is believing. Every Wednesday for the past few years, as a contractor, I've been going to The Arbors of Bedford in Bedford NH to play the Native American flute in a group setting for a one hour activity. The Arbors is a dedicated memory-impairment living residence which is a secured facility. My normal routine consisted of playing backing track of native drum rhythms from a CD. The rhythms are simple, repetitive rhythms. To those rhythms, I played my Native American flutes. Eventually, the routine evolved and the residents were given small percussion instruments, namely rattles and handheld cluster bells, so they could play along. About a year ago I coordinated a HealthRHYTHMS training, which the Arbors graciously hosted at no charge. Following the training, I started to incorporate more and more interactive rhythm activities into the group event.

One Wednesday in April of 2016, I started my usual routine. Almost all the residents had percussion instruments, two residents had full-sized drums, and an Activities Associate bravely sat in the chair next to me at the front of the room and played another full-sized drum. On this particular day, the attendance was the best I'd ever seen it. The residents were clearly very comfortable with our weekly routine. I would put on the rhythm track, they would start to play along to it, and I would play flute on top of that, keeping a chain of songs going to keep them engaged.

Something different happened that day. Midway into the first song, I saw the associate struggling to hear the beat from the speaker. The rhythm of the group had become so consistent and strong that the rhythm track became a distraction. The group had created its own rhythm and it overpowered the CD. Something needed to happen. I asked her if she was comfortable with me turning off the CD to see if we could sustain a consistent rhythm without it. She was totally excited and enthusiastic at the prospect. I turned it off while she kept a steady beat and voilà - the Arbors residents were engaged in a full-blown drum circle!

Their rhythm was steady and some residents even got fancy with in-between beats. The rattles and cluster bells rounded out the sound. Over this live rhythm, I began my repertoire on the Native American flute. The Associate playing a simple, strong, and steady beat at the front was an important part of the success of this experience. I cannot play flute and drum at the same time, so an ally is important.

Whenever possible I walked around, giving reinforcing body language and plenty of smiling eyes to each participant. I kept a steady rhythm on my flute. It was consistent and strong. The whole group had entrained to a common rhythm. The group rhythm held steady. Before my eyes, individuals who were withdrawn just minutes ago were fully engaged with the activity as well as with each other.

Since that day, the CD is only played for about 10 seconds and then is turned off as the group's rhythm becomes cohesive. The attendance since then has consistently been high. I asked the Associate how she thought this weekly event was going. She said this was the best attended event. Anyone can see why. The residents are joyfully engaged. They are sharing a beautiful group dynamic as they play with their fellow residents and staff. There is plenty of research pointing to the many health benefits of therapeutic drumming and community music making so I won't mention it here, although it is certainly impressive and worth a search on Google to see the innovative activities popping up everywhere with therapeutic drumming. The joy of all the residents present was contagious to say the least. How awesome is it that this musical experience could be so spontaneous, organic, and beneficial?

The spirit of the drum is alive and well in this population. Our natural ability to join together in rhythm transcends age, race, and many other challenges the residence endure. For a peek at this, take a look online at (link from Amber of video of the event).