

An Emerald Music Moment with Mary Sue

by Mary Sue Wilkinson, Founder of Singing Heart to Heart

Ellen is a short woman with a round face framed by soft blonde gray hair. Today she's wearing blue pants, sneakers, and a sweatshirt draped with Mardi Gras Beads – some are colorful and some spell L-O-V-E. Around her waist is a wide canvas belt – the type the staff use to help lift people; despite the fact that Ellen is totally mobile and needs no assistance.

I learn that today is Ellen's first day in the locked dementia care wing of a large nursing home. Ellen's son is with her and I get the sense that she is experiencing this as a "visit" somewhere. She appears unconcerned and a bit curious about her surroundings.

The staff tell me Ellen is a pianist. "She plays beautifully." I unpack my guitar, then greet Ellen, inviting her to come and sing with me. With only slight hesitation she comes to stand near me and I begin to sing *You Are my Sunshine*. Ellen's smile is immediate as she recognizes the familiar song. She joins in, moving effortlessly between lower and higher harmony parts. Clearly this woman is an accomplished musician. My own happiness explodes as I experience the kinship and connection I always feel when I sing with other musicians.

Ellen's attention quickly wanders and she moves away, strolling down the corridor, chatting with her son. He guides her back to where I am singing and brings a chair for her to the edge of the group. As she sits down I catch her eye. We sing *Side by Side* and *Music Music Music*. We sing *The Old Gray Mare*. I break into *How Much is that Doggie in the Window*. She turns to her son to say "That's a funny song."

Ellen misses a few song lyrics here and there but I hear her beautiful harmony. On every song. Not surprisingly, Ellen's manners are fully in tact and she stops every few minutes to ask her son if he wants to sit down too. He reassures her that he is happy to stand by her side.

As the sing along continues I move about the room, making eye contact with residents, most of whom are reclining in easy chairs. I make sure to keep contact with Ellen, giving her big smiles, thumbs up signs and compliments on the harmonies she is contributing.

The music session continues and while Ellen is engaged singing with me her son slips out. It makes it easier for him to leave, knowing she is engrossed in the music and interacting with me.

And then it's almost time for me to go. The last song is *God Bless America*. As the song begins Ellen's face lights up and she moves in to stand close to me, face to face. We lock eyes, both of us smiling. Ellen adds a perfect harmony. Her vibrato syncs with mine as we sing the last line in unison. When the song is over we are both grinning ear to ear. I give her a big hug and thank her.

I leave knowing I have made a new musical friend. And that Ellen's transition to her new home has been made a bit easier through music.

Mary Sue Wilkinson is the founder of Singing Heart to Heart. She is a musician specializing in using music in dementia care, a speaker and the author of "Songs You Know By Heart: A Simple Guide for Using Music in Dementia Care." The book includes contributions from Teepa Snow as well as Mary Sue's CD of 18 favorite sing along songs. Buy the book [HERE](#). For more resources from Mary Sue please visit her website www.SingingHeartToHeart.com