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Music Makes World Go 'Round and Music Therapist Go 'Round World

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Music therapy, more than merely the marriage of music and psychology, is the skillful, clinical, evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship.

It's a relationship Barbara Wheeler of Surf City knows well – in fact, she is a world-renowned authority on the subject and the editor of several important books on music therapy between 1995 and now.

Her work spanning four decades was honored this year with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the World Federation of Music Therapy.

The honor is the latest on a list of nearly 20 distinctions she has amassed in her professional life, from one of the more than 20 organizations with which she is affiliated. Friend and colleague Kathy King of Beach Haven vouched for Wheeler's deservingness. "I enjoy knowing her because of her expertise and accomplishments in music therapy, her savvy about life in general and because she is a charming lady."

Wheeler grew up in Wyoming and Nebraska with a dad who was an orchestra director and instilled in her a love of classical music. She sings and plays violin, guitar and piano. She attended Hastings College where she studied organ, voice and music education. She earned her equivalency masters in music therapy at Florida State and interned at Milledgeville, Ga. Her doctorate is in educational psychology from Fordham University.

All along, she said, she has "wanted to help music therapy be more relevant."

In the '70s, schools that offered music therapy were few and far between, she said. Now there are lots of good programs. In New Jersey, the only one is the one she launched at Montclair State University. Philadelphia has Temple, Drexel and Immaculata universities.

Now retired from academic and clinical work, she does a great deal of international travel to teach, consult, and deliver presentations and keynote speeches. In early November she will attend a research conference in Valencia, Spain. January will see her in Germany. Every other year she has an engagement in Poland. She serves as an external examiner in the music therapy masters program at the University of Limerick in Ireland. She is a consultant to a spa in Beijing, China, where she is helping to design a music and wellness program.

But the whole world doesn't necessarily agree on the role music therapy plays, or should or could play, in all areas of medicine, or the requirements to become a music therapist. France, for example, is highly psychoanalytically oriented; Italy has maybe 25 different music therapy associations; Portugal wants to increase the field's credibility through assessments. The World Federation is working to establish standards, Wheeler said. In general, she added, the field is in need of further research, training and funding.

The award recognizes Wheeler's "extraordinary contribution to the worldwide development of our profession, particularly in the areas of education and research. She holds the title of professor emerita from Montclair State University, where she taught from 1975 to 2000.

"She subsequently initiated the music therapy training at the University of Louisville, where she taught until retirement in 2011. Current appointments include teaching at the University of Applied Sciences Wurzburg-Schweinfurt, Germany, and the Karol Szymanowski Academy



“(Wheeler) has long been active in national and international music therapy associations. She is past president of the American Music Therapy Association, past chair of the Commission on Education and Training for the WFMT and was recently Interview Co-Editor for ‘Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy.’ She has received numerous awards from the AMTA and has been keynote speaker at conferences held on every continent across the world. (Wheeler) contributed to more than 30 items and columns for ‘Voices,’ including a series of interviews for the WFMT symposium on education and training prior to the World Congress in 2012.

“With associate editor Kathy Murphy, (Wheeler) has just completed editing Music Therapy Research, Third Edition (2016), the latest addition to her phenomenal publication history.”

In 1995 she published her first book, Music Therapy Research, which talked about how to do qualitative and quantitative research.

Wheeler purchased a condo in Beach Haven in 2004 and used it as a rental property; in 2014 she sold it and bought her Surf City home, where she now lives full time.

Music therapy has grown tremendously in her time – from the development of melodic intonation therapy in the '60s and '70s that aimed to convert singing into speech, and guided imagery, one of the more powerful techniques that takes people to deep levels of consciousness, to more recent applications for Alzheimer's patients – and gained some widespread visibility. Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords famously “found her voice again” through music therapy after a gunshot wound to the head in 2011. This year's PBS coverage of “A Capitol Fourth” Independence Day celebration in Washington, D.C., had a segment about an Army captain who was severely injured in an IED blast and has made remarkable progress after undergoing extensive treatment that has included emerging techniques of music therapy. Last year, New York University, home of the Nordoff-Robbins Center for Music Therapy, published an article linking music with new ways of thinking about autism.

Music is processed in different parts of the brain at the same time, both while listening and participating, Wheeler explained, so it can provide a more holistic approach toward promoting, maintaining and restoring (mental, physical, emotional and spiritual) health. Evaluations look for a demonstrated responsiveness toward reaching IEP goals, she said. If behavior is a targeted area of the therapy, for example, some structured, rhythmic music and movement can redirect energy.

“I think music therapy is amazing,” Wheeler said.

In her career, she has worked with most populations – all ages, those with mental illness and addiction, survivors of sexual abuse and traumatic brain injuries – but her biggest joy has been working with children with multiple severe disabilities. She wrote a paper about the four categories of pleasure she experienced when working with them at Regional Day School in Morris County: intentionality, emotionality, communication, mutuality.

In 2011 she retired from clinical work in hospitals and rehabs, which focused on neurological issues. In those settings, she explained, the music provides more than comfort. The way a patient relates to a given selection may open a pathway to improved executive function.

The trick is “finding the music they respond to,” she said.

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