

# Music Students' Experiences of Music Interaction with Residents Living in Two Northwestern Ontario Long-Term Care Homes

S. V. Saukko, MSW-Gerontology (candidate), M. McKee, PhD, D. Jobin-Bevans, PhD, L. Vaugeois, PhD (candidate) & M.L. Kelley, MSW, PhD  
Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada

## BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE:

This project is part of a five-year program of research titled "Improving Quality of Life for People Dying in Long-Term Care Homes" also known as Quality Palliative Care in Long-Term Care (QPC-LTC). It is funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) grant and is a Community University Research Alliance Project (CURA). Dr. M.L. Kelley is the Principal Investigator. For this study, we were interested both in the impact on Long-Term Care (LTC) residents of music interaction and activation, and also in the impact on the students who participated. This poster reports the latter. We followed a group of ten Lakehead University music students (age 18-22) who enrolled in a pilot music course titled Creative Community Engagements in Music as they participated in music interactions at two LTC homes in Thunder Bay. This was the first exposure to LTC for many of them. The goal of the study was to document the students' experiences, particularly, to see if the opportunity to make music with LTC residents changed student attitudes towards older people and aging. Our initial hope was that exposure to seniors at the study sites would be a positive learning experience for students, and contribute to the development of positive attitudes towards seniors and aging.



### Music Interaction Sessions

took place from late September 2011 to late March 2012 from 10:00 am to 11:00 am on non-consecutive Fridays. Music was played and sung from songbooks in a sing-a-long format from the residents' musical era. As the students became comfortable, many played instrumental pieces or sang contemporary songs for the residents. Twenty to thirty LTC residents participated at each session, as well as family caregivers and LTC staff.

## METHOD:

At the end of the course, all students were invited to participate in a focus group and in individual interviews about their experience. Nine students participated in the focus group and four participated in the individual interviews which were all transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using standard qualitative methods. From this analysis, the themes were revealed and some of the results are presented here.

## RESULTS:

### At the Beginning of the Experience

#### Trapped in a Body

The students found it confusing, frightening and disturbing. Most were expecting able-bodied, coherent, verbal, and independent residents like they imagined they would find in a "retirement home". Instead, many residents were immobile and had various levels of dementia.

*"I think it's terrifying. To think that you're going to grow old and maybe your mind is trapped in the body that is not letting you communicate or express yourself ..."*

### During the Experience

#### Non-interactions were Discouraging

Some of the students understood and interpreted the non-communication and non-responsiveness of residents as a personal rejection.

*"I found my comfort changed depending on who I was sitting by...[When] they won't say anything ....you don't know if they don't really want you there."*

#### Verbal Communication was a Difficulty

*"...starting conversations was hard... I'd say something and then they would mumble something to me and I would think I don't really know what you're saying, and I don't really know how to continue with this."*

### By the End of the Experience

#### The Residents' time and Well-Being became a Concern

The students recognized the value of what they were doing in the LTC homes and expressed concern for the rest of the residents' time, well-being and their quality of life.

*"...we were going in there and we were making a difference, but it was just like, what are they doing for the other like 23 hours of the day?"*

#### Marginalization, a Separated and Separate World

The students cultivated a critical awareness of the marginalization of people living in LTC. *"I found it concerning that more [people] don't know about what is actually going on in LTC and they're [residents] under-represented in like everything except for this little bubble..."*

#### Residents' Enjoyment of Music

Residents' even those that appear very frail or with severe dementia can benefit. Music reaches a part of the person that can still appreciate music, a preserved intact memory. 1

*"...it was really rewarding... especially when non-responsive people became responsive...It's like something in their brains just went on!"*

#### Students Re-learned that Music with People Living in LTC is about Fun

*"I think of performance and I think of perfection but I mean for them [residents] as long as they are singing along, you can play a wrong note...it is supposed to be fun...it's about our time interacting with them..."*



All photographs by Jessica Wyatt, 2011

## CONCLUSION:

**Contrary to our Expectations:** The experience was not entirely positive for the students. They became even more anxious about ending up like "that," "trapped in a body," and "totally dependent" on others for everything. This frightened them, but it also made them think about what they would want for themselves or for their parents when the time comes and they are aged. Some questioned the validity of medical advances that help people live longer if the last years of their life are spent living like "that".

Nonetheless, the positive outcome was the students were able to see that music had a wonderful engaging and awakening effect on people living with dementia in LTC. The residents really appreciated the time spent singing together with the students in a mutual, engaging and interactive activity as opposed to being passively entertained as an audience.

**Recommendations:** In future delivery of a course like this we strongly recommend:

1. Prepare students thoroughly for the experience in LTC. They need specific education about the kinds of residents, behavior and reactions they will encounter.
2. Coach students on how to recognize micro expressions of enjoyment and engagement. (please contact 1<sup>st</sup> author for more information, at email below)
3. Prepare students for non-verbal communication or unusual reactions of the residents. Let them know communication might take time to develop and has to be observed closely.
4. Debrief the experience: Encourage them to ask a lot of questions. Ask them about their experience, and help them interpret it. What did you find impressive, surprising or scary? Was there a resident who made an impression on you? Why?
5. Debriefing needs to be a continuous and ongoing process.



## REFERENCE:

- 1 - Cohen, G. (2006). Research on creativity and aging: The positive impact of the arts on health and illness. *Generations*, 30, (1), 7-15.

Stacey Saukko would like to acknowledge the generous support from the QPC-LTC project. The Ontario Graduate Scholarship. The Ontario Research Coalition Award and the Centre for Education and Research on Aging and Health (CERAH) at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario.