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Music Therapy in Grand Cayman

Giving a Voice to the Sunrise Centre

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Nothing could have prepared our trio of prospective music therapists for either the impact we would have or the insights we would gain from our week spent at the Sunrise Adult Training Centre in Grand Cayman. We boarded the airplane at Boston Logan International with our guitars, our song lists and open minds. When we boarded our return flight at Owen Roberts International, just one week later, we had new relationships, wisdom and life experiences that will be most difficult to thoroughly articulate. We very much hoped that the music would do all the talking.

Upon our arrival at the Sunrise Centre on Monday morning, an eager crowd of staff and clients greeted us warmly. As we received our tour of the facility, observed some of the clients and spoke briefly with Miss Bonnie about the history of the centre, it became increasingly clear that Sunrise was ready for us—and it was our job to show them what exactly we had to offer. We proceeded to present our in-service about music therapy to the Sunrise staff, and they wrote things down, asked really great questions, and appeared to be quite interested in what we had to say. They even humored us by singing along and participating in our welcome song activity. It felt like a positive start to the week ahead.





Following our in-service, we got the opportunity to meet our first group of clients for a 45-minute session. This group acted as a perfect foreshadowing for the passion, courage, and overwhelming sense of musicality that we would get to see on a daily basis for the rest of the week.

Our daily sessions were divided into two groups: Group 1 would be a reoccurring group of participants, most of whom would be participating in the Special Olympics events in Cayman throughout the week. The second group would rotate daily, in order for us to interact with as many people in the centre as we could in our limited amount of time. Our goals for both groups would remain the same, however, in that it was our mission to focus on empowerment, independence, and abilities, as that seemed to echo the sentiments of the Sunrise Centre's mission statement, as well as the philosophy of the Special Olympics. We wanted to introduce music, and moreover, structured music activities, as an alternative method to reinforce these themes.

In the first group, one of our ultimate goals was to teach them part of the song that our student group planned to sing at the Special Olympics Closing Ceremony, with the intention of having the group members join us on stage for the performance. In the beginning of the learning process, we encouraged the participants to play along with their instruments as they listened to the lyrics of the song. The themes of the song, called "Go Do," revolved around teamwork, determination and success, with the hopes of being easily relatable to the Special Olympics, music and every day life skills. Once the group as a whole became familiar with the song, various members were encouraged to help the rest of the group by leading a part of the song, either with their voice or their chosen instrument. This leadership opportunity allowed for varying degrees of self-esteem and mastery, as well as reinforcement of various social skills (listening, turn-taking, and sharing). The public performance at the closing ceremony gave the participants something to work toward, as a single group, which in turn increased the rapport and relationships among the individuals. As the week progressed, some changes were noted in levels of participation among specific group members. One young man who tended to be reluctant to play instruments, stating that it was difficult to use his hands, by the end of the week was one of the group's strongest percussionists and appeared on stage to showcase his shaker skills at the closing ceremony. Another young woman who had clearly established a voice of her own before our team had even arrived, was taking a step back and listening closely to the voices of her colleagues, and at times taking an even larger step forward and providing support and encouragement for her friends who were finding their own ways to express themselves.



Our second daily group with rotating participants was focused around many of the same objectives as the first group, specifically the idea of being able to hear each group member's musical ideas individually, and then collaborating as a team to include each participant's ideas and contributions into a single, unified ensemble. We strived to attain a delicate balance between highlighting those in the group with strong, established musical abilities and supporting and encouraging those in the group who were still in the process of learning new musical skills. It was often the case that the more "advanced" group members would take it upon themselves to motivate their peers to experiment with a new instrument or to sing a solo on a verse of a song.

The most popular activity for both groups throughout the week seemed to be the opportunities they had to play the guitar. The guitar is a very engaging instrument due to its harmonic nature and cultural familiarity. There is also an association of complexity regarding the physical act of its operation, thus increasing its appeal for people to try it and succeed. Allowing the Sunrise participants to step outside their traditional box of percussion instruments and hear themselves playing an instrument that they had heard on the radio or seen on television their whole lives truly offered a feeling of empowerment and mastery that auxiliary percussion instruments could not match. There was also an added leadership component in these activities, as the person in charge of playing the guitar was responsible for accompanying the entire group as we sang along. With leadership opportunities comes confidence and self-esteem, followed very shortly by independence and pride.

As music therapy students, our time at Sunrise provided us five days of invaluable training and experience that we will, without question, integrate into our development toward our clinical profession. We were challenged to enter into a population unfamiliar to all three of us, in a foreign country, and foster relationships and enhance quality of life through music in just one week. In just one week, we also had the privilege of learning some traditional songs of Cayman (courtesy of the participants), while at the same time developing our clinical musicianship skills, specifically our guitar accompaniment, ear training and lyrical and harmonic improvisation. We were able to practice transitioning between activities and doing so smoothly, so as to create a cohesive and structured music session. And most importantly, we were able to refine our therapeutic relationship skills. We practiced relating to people, both clients and staff, not through words, not through actions, and not through writing... but through song and dance and laughter. Sunrise Adult Training Centre has a voice in Grand Cayman... and we heard it loud and clear.