

Singing for the Brain Renfrewshire

For anyone with a loved one diagnosed with Dementia, the hardest thing is to watch as the illness slowly takes hold and bit by bit the person loses cognitive abilities until they are “locked” into themselves. Quality of life for a patient and for the carers too can be hard to maintain. One way that cuts through the fog is singing, as Singing for the Brain Renfrewshire can attest.

Occupational Therapist Tamasine Spaeth of the Mental Health Day Hospital in Paisley’s Royal Alexandria Hospital was inspired by a 2009 BBC2 documentary “Wonderland: the Alzheimer’s Choir” and this film showed people with dementia singing with relatives and friends in a Singing for the Brain group in the South West of England. Group members told how, through the singing, they had experienced social, emotional and physical benefits. “From the moment I saw the documentary I was determined to set up something similar in Renfrewshire,” said Tamasine. “I found the documentary incredibly uplifting because it showed people with dementia and their families having a good time together and making friends in a natural way. People were happy and animated. It was difficult to tell who had dementia and who didn’t. I also wept because it was such a far cry from my own experiences many years ago, when I visited my father on locked psychiatric wards. He developed dementia in his early 50’s and very quickly lost his job, his freedom and eventually his speech. I still have vivid memories of standing awkwardly in the large, bleak, empty wards, not knowing how to ‘be’ with him, yet wanting so much to make contact. I wept because I wished there had been a group like this for me and my father.

“I therefore got in touch with the local services of Alzheimer Scotland and set the ball rolling.” Setting up the group was a challenge for Tamasine and her partners when they hit countless barriers and when their volunteer singing leader suddenly passed away, they came close to giving up. Just then an offer of funding came through from an NHS endowment and this allowed the recruitment of Community Musician Dr. Jane Bentley, who has extensive experience in working with people who have no musical knowledge and also people with dementia. And so nine months later, in September 2010 the first ‘Singing for the Brain Renfrewshire’ session took place. This ran for ten weeks, every Tuesday night from 7.00 to 8.30pm in the Mental Health Day Hospital in Paisley’s RAH. “From the outset we received tremendous support” said Tamasine. “Attendance during this pilot programme was much better than expected, even in bad weather. It continues to develop, flourish and surprise us. As an occupational therapist, I strongly believe that engaging in meaningful activity is beneficial for mental and physical well-being. This is particularly the case for people with dementia who are struggling to maintain everyday skills at home and who are facing stigma and social isolation. Carers are frequently stressed and exhausted by the increasing demands on their time and energy, and frustrated by diminishing support services. Attending the group each week gives people something to look forward to. People are often able to sing, even after they stop speaking. It’s amazing to see people ‘come alive’ as the group progresses; rather like watering wilted flowers. Jane has a remarkable talent for putting people at ease and working with the group, wherever it leads her. No-one has to explain themselves or worry that their relative might do something ‘embarrassing’.”

Community Musician Dr Jane Bentley was delighted to be part of this new venture. Such was the success of this, 16 further sessions were organised which ran from January to May 2011. “Forty people came along to the ‘end of season’ party and we sang, played pass the parcel and guessed the number of songs we had sung during the year.” That number is a stupendous 121 and in the Top Ten are favourites such as “Catch a Falling Star”, “Skye Boat Song”, “Pack up Your Troubles” & “You are my Sunshine.”

Jane reported that singing a variety of song types helps to exercise the different skills that people have: for example, action songs involve motor skills (as well as being great fun for everyone) while group members will often have their own favourite song that they would like everyone to sing- using long term memory. The group even practices new songs- demonstrating improvement week by week. Using instruments such as hand held drums and percussion help add variety and a whole other dimension to the session. Social interaction skills and group awareness are encouraged by having one side of the room singing to the other or each side singing different parts.

Jane also added –“It's continued to be a well-attended group, which has very much bonded with each other over the time we've been singing together. A big plus has been that we also see several family members coming in, who have really made this activity part of spending time with their loved one. At our Christmas party, we had four generations of one family present! It is genuinely humbling to see a dementia patient who is “locked in” suddenly brighten up and start joining in when a song begins. Something triggers a memory and response. An unexpected side effect has been the wider surge of interest in this type of work. We have been visited by many mental health and older adult care practitioners, resulting in the formation of several similar groups. This has had a knock-on effect for me as a musician, leading to projects in two nursing homes, two day centres, a continuing care ward, and a day hospital. We've also run a training event in the form of an afternoon to 'learn about Singing for the Brain' , which 130 people booked up for, and which led to longer trainings for people who want to take this kind of work further - and all from one initial project!”

Any group needs feedback to know if they are on the right track .Tamasine added- “We had an average of thirty people attending each week and found that we had people with dementia coming from their own homes and also from nursing homes. We have received inspiring feedback. One person wrote in our Comments Book- *“The group is fantastic. It brings my mum back to us as a family for an hour each week,”* and another added *“Mum does not recognise much as her dementia has taken so much of her life. However, something from Singing for the Brain sticks and has added quality to her life.”*

What about the future for Singing for the Brain?

“My hope is that in a couple of years’ time this sort of thing will be the norm in care settings,” replied Jane. “When I started out, music seemed like the 'secret magic ingredient' - one that worked wonders in engaging people, but that few people knew about. I see this changing all the time, and there is a real groundswell of enthusiasm and interest in this area, from both service users, care providers, and higher up the institutional hierarchies. Quite often there is a lot of nervousness around engaging with music, but as more people experience it and see the effects, I hope they are able to overcome their shyness and have a go! I'm determined to do all that I can to help that to happen.”

And a final word from Tamasine-“There’s a spirit of acceptance, warmth and good humour which never fails to move me. And I always go home singing!”

Anyone interested in Singing for the Brain should contact Tamasine Spaeth at the Mental Health Day Hospital in Paisley Royal Alexandria Hospital on 0141 314 6848 or via www.sftb.net. Alternatively, Dr Jane Bentley can be contacted on 0775 949 0775 or at www.art-beat.info or artbeat@me.com

Tom Chalmers

January 2012