

A harpist's practice in sound therapy

By Peter Schworm, Globe Staff |
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The ethereal, enchanting sound held Peter Russo spellbound. Minutes passed as he stood still on the second-floor concourse in Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, bathed in the shimmering vibrations of a Celtic harp. His face softened, and he smiled to himself, a faraway look in his eyes.

"I was lost," he murmured a bit later, careful not to disturb the harpist, her gentle strums, or the gathering audience. "A nice lost."

Russo, a 45-year-old Boston resident visiting Beth Israel for a prescription one recent morning, said the music had a restful, restorative quality that quiets fears and lightens burdens.

"It's a form of serenity," he said. "You can feel the healing."

Her fingers gliding across the taut strings, Nancy Kleiman smiled appreciatively at Russo as he walked away, touched by his reaction. A self-taught harpist from Dedham trained in therapeutic music, Kleiman, 58, has played at Beth Israel for about 10 hours a week for the past year through a hospital program designed to bring a comforting, hopeful tone to an often daunting and disquieting place.

Kleiman plays her 30-string maple lever harp throughout the hospital, the gentle strain wafting through busy lobbies, patient waiting areas, the oncology ward, even to the bedsides of patients. The harp is blessed with a "haunting, magical" power, she said, that can ease troubled minds and lift spirits in times of grief and loss.

Kleiman, who has played at Massachusetts General Hospital through a similar program called the Gentle-MUSES and is arranging to play at Brigham and Women's Hospital, keeps a journal of her visits, a poignant testimony to the music's emotional resonance. The sound draws smiles from careworn family members, relieved sighs from patients waiting for a prognosis or procedure, waves from grateful strangers.

One patient told her the music's elegance brought a

smile to her face for the first time in weeks; another said it let her cry for the first time since her husband's death. A listener said the sound stole her away, made her feel like she "wasn't in the hospital anymore." Another gave her the bracelet off her wrist, as thanks.

One woman, drained from hours of tests and "barely holding it together," said the music helped her to cope.

"She said, 'When I heard you play, it made everything fade away,'" Kleiman recalled.

Dedham woman's music at hospital is a salve for patients, families

The program is financed by a \$25,000 anonymous grant from "someone who believes strongly in the power of music," said Barbara Sarnoff Lee, Beth Israel's director of social work. Although research indicates that harp music has medicinal properties such as slowing heart rates and easing pain, the program is aimed at the psyche, she said.

"There's more to healthcare than broken hips and heart attacks," she said.

"It's about healing in every sense.

For patients, the music provides an "oasis of calm" in an otherwise anxious setting, and hospital staff have also embraced the music as a source of solace and inspiration in a profession that can be draining, she said. The hospital hopes to expand the program soon.

Kleiman plays many traditional tunes, and as she strummed "Greensleeves," hurried workers in the ambulatory care clinic slowed, patients using canes and walkers paused, and pacing family members stopped to listen.

Martha Ellen Katz, a doctor who works at Harvard University, said the harp conveyed a beauty and sense of compassion that reminds the ailing and their loved ones why life is worth living.

"People aren't healthy unless their sense of the world is healthy," she said. "This touches a part of the body traditional medicine can't reach."

Kleiman, who was inspired to learn to play the harp after taking part in a musical vigil for a dying performer, strives to create a "sacred, healing environment," as well as a vibrant personal connection with listeners. She meditates beforehand, and believes playing therapeutic harp music is her life's purpose.

A former nun, Kleiman likens her music to a form of ministry, noting that the harp is mentioned 54 times in the Bible.

"I do think it connects with people in a spiritual way," she said.

Amy Camie, the executive director of the St. Louis-based Scientific Arts Foundation, which is studying the medical impact of harp therapy, believes the harp, in the right hands, is an instrument of care.

"When someone creates something from their heart, it touches the listener in the same place," she said.

"It resonates sympathetically with that person."

Pedro Gonzalez, who works with cancer patients at Beth Israel, often follows the distant sound of Kleiman to its source. Scared and vulnerable patients often find the sound profoundly moving, he said. He finds the music sad but inspiring, capable of summoning our better angels.

"It wakes up your emotions, sends away all the stress," he said. "It's like a pat on the back."

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Harpist Nancy Kleiman playing at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston.