

Music for the dying



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Carolyn Ancell is a professional harpist who plays to an audience of people about to die.

Her repertoire ranges from "Amazing Grace" to "Home on the Range."

One of two musicians employed by Tucson's Casa de la Luz Hospice, Ancell, 62, is a certified music practitioner — someone who plays healing music for people who are ill and dying, and often experiencing profound pain and anxiety.

Rather than viewing her job as depressing, Ancell says she is honored to be present with people during what she says is a special, sacred time. And she's grateful that despite mounting health-care costs, hospices across the country are recognizing the power of sound.

Though hospices often use volunteer musicians, Ancell's role at Casa de la Luz is unique because she is not only a paid staff member but also a musician specifically trained to play for the "actively dying."

The other musician on staff at the hospice is nurse RuthiE Neilan (she uses the upper-case E), an American Indian flutist. Casa de la Luz also has on staff a Zen shiatsu and craniosacral massage therapist, Ron Bogard, who often works alongside Ancell.

Adding alternative therapies such as live music and massage as complements to traditional Western medicine has been gaining ground in hospices and health care in general, said Marie Fredette, executive director of the Arizona Hospice and Palliative Care Organization.

Ancell and other music practitioners are emphatic that while what they do is therapeutic, it is not music therapy. Rather, music practitioners assist in the transition between life and death. The 11-year-old New York-based Music for Healing and Transition Program, where Ancell earned her certification, says research has shown the use of music can lower blood pressure and basal metabolism and respiration rates, and that it increases production of endorphins, which reduce pain.

The group also says music is becoming part of a therapy in drug and alcohol detoxification, with Alzheimer's and comatose patients, and as an aid for those with learning disabilities.

Since the average stay at the nine-bed Casa de la Luz inpatient unit is just three days, Ancell often finds herself playing for patients who are shocked and angry. Her goal is to help soothe that agitation and stress.

"The patients are my greatest teachers," she said. "When you are dying, there are no more games. What you see is what you get, and people are vulnerable, open and honest. I hope when I'm dying I'm as truthful and honest as the patients I'm with now."

Ancell played "Some Enchanted Evening" for Helen and Louis Starr last November.

"That was our theme song," said Helen, 82.

The couple met at a dance in 1947 at St. Cecilia's Catholic Church in Baltimore. Helen was engaged to someone else at the time, though she and Louis had been exchanging glances, which is why the song's words: "You will see a stranger across a crowded room," later resonated. They married in 1949.

When Ancell played, the couple's six children and one of their grandchildren were in the room. They all sang.

"They say the hearing is the last to go. He was not talking but we think he heard us," Helen said recently. "The kids were touched, and I certainly was."

Louis died last Nov. 23 at age 83.

No two patients are alike, said Ancell, who studies each patient's history, taken down by nurses and spiritual counselors, before she visits their room.

For devout Hispanics, Ancell often plays "El Señor es Mi Pastor," sometimes singing with patients and their families. She also has chanted the rosary. For other patients, she plays songs from their youth. She recently played "Danny Boy" for an Irish patient.

For 19 years, Ancell was a paid parochial liturgist for the Roman Catholic Diocese of Tucson and comes to her job from a spiritual perspective. She holds degrees in religious studies and pastoral ministry, and is studying to be an ordained interfaith minister.

A musician all her life, Ancell began playing the church organ at 14. She was 50 when she took up harp and now studies with Patricia Harris, the Tucson Symphony's principal harpist.

Hired by Casa de la Luz two years ago, Ancell now plays harp for its patients for 20 hours each week.

"We've had music at the bedside since we opened. We realize it's a luxury," said Lynette E. Jaramillo, who co-founded Casa de la Luz eight years ago along with business partner Agnes C. Poore.

"It's a pretty precious time for people, and there's something about music that's healing and very personal," Poore said.

Jaramillo and Poore say they know of no other hospices in Tucson that have musicians on staff, though some use volunteer musicians. Hospice of the Valley in Phoenix has had three professional harpists on staff since 1998, said Steve Averill, the hospice's director of counseling and support services, who knows of no other Phoenix hospices with paid

musicians.

"There is such a therapeutic value in it — it's used to calm anxious patients and helps in pain control and in soothing families," Averill said. "As well, it helps our staff."

On Nov. 1, Ancell entered Casa de la Luz's room No. 4. Inside was 96-year-old Ernestine "Ernie" Miller, a Michigan native, eating breakfast with the help of one of her sons. Miller and her younger sister had traveled to Tucson from Spring Lake, Mich., as snowbirds for years and had recently arrived in town when Miller had a fall and became ill.

A mother of three, grandmother of eight and great-grandmother of 22, Miller once taught primary school, fearlessly paddled a canoe alone, beat cancer twice and was known for an intense love for her family. When her husband died 10 years ago, Miller continued to live on her own, though her family was always nearby.

A Presbyterian who read her Bible daily, Miller told hospice workers that she loved hymns.

When Ancell wordlessly pulled a chair up to Miller's bedside, she played "How Great Thou Art," and "You'll Never Walk Alone." She added some bars of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and "I Love You Truly."

After about 40 minutes, as Ancell finished, Miller opened her eyes and smiled. The two women touched hands. Wiping their eyes, Miller's two sons and their wives thanked Ancell.

"It's a constant growth process for me, trying to be a good music practitioner," Ancell said. "It's the patient's agenda, not the musician's."

Though many of the songs she plays are familiar, Ancell plays them in an arrhythmic way and weaves in healing compositions, improvisations, simple melodies and harmonies. She explained that such music supports the process of sifting and identifying unfinished business, as well as the process of letting go of the rhythms of the heartbeat and respiration.

Miller died peacefully on Wednesday morning.

On StarNet: See a video of Carolyn Ancell playing the harp for a patient and speaking about her music at azstarnet.com/video

- For more information about Casa de la Luz, go to www.casahospice.com or call the hospice at 544-9894.