



Susan Carol provides therapeutic music to a Westminster Canterbury Lynchburg resident.

Music Ministry undaunted by pandemic

by Connie Sowa

One of the most unique activities at Westminster Canterbury is the Music Ministry program provided by Susan Carol. Most folks know her as the “lady that plays the harp.” But what many don’t know is that Susan is a Certified Clinical Musician (CCM), which means that she has learned how to blend musical arts with the science of sound suitable for therapeutic settings. Her goal is to enhance a resident’s environment to promote healing by applying therapeutic music – not to entertain or give a performance.

Susan custom tailors each session to what a resident might be experiencing on any given day, whether it is something soothing to relax people who are anxious or a nostalgic tune to aid mental focus. These live music sessions are very successful and beneficial because of Susan’s ability to listen and watch the resident, analyzing and adapting her musical approach as needed. Bonds form through

these visits and Susan’s ministry on the campus is highly sought after.

“Her program is so important to residents,” said April Keehan, WCL Social Worker and Activity Consultant. “She reaches people – from the independent lover of the arts to the non-verbal residents who are unable to respond physically. She also calms the anxious hospice patient on their final days with soothing and relaxing music to help them die with dignity.”

All of the live sessions halted with the advent of the Coronavirus pandemic. Suddenly, Susan could no longer provide in-person therapeutic music. But she believed that the harp would still convey across the internet through a livestream format.

While she experimented with different microphones, lighting elements and digital platforms, the

therapeutic recreation team secured iPads to schedule virtual visits between residents and their family members. Virtual harp sessions would not be the same as having the instrument in a resident's room filling the air with all of the harmonics, overtones and vibrations that provide physical benefits, but being able to hear the instrument through the computer was worth trying. "It's kind of amazing that even those with hearing challenges were able to hear the music with just a simple boost on my microphone through the air to their device," Susan said.

Being able to watch the resident during a livestream session proved to be challenging at times. She laughed, though, when she related this story: "The staff member gave the resident the iPad because she's pretty mobile. We started out in the dining room," said Susan. "Well, she decided she was going to move around. I think she had the iPad on a little tray table.

"I'm playing and all of the sudden I see in my peripheral vision, from the computer, that we were moving a lot and to me it felt almost like we were spinning in circles. It was so cute because she was having such a good time and she just wanted to be sure that we shared this with everyone."

Both staff members and residents agree that being able to have real-time conversations with Susan through FaceTime sessions has been more effective in boosting morale and staying engaged than online or pre-recorded options. Assisted Living Activities Coordinator Megan Williams told Susan, "I thoroughly enjoyed carrying you around with me, sharing your music. It helps me get to know the residents in a different way than I normally experience."

Even residents with memory challenges have continued to benefit greatly from Susan's livestreaming sessions. Scott Shaw, Memory Support Recreation Coordinator, said, "This was a trying time where families and friends could not visit and recreation programming was limited.

Having Susan play from home was a blessing. The residents ask about her several times through the week hoping to hear her play. Being in a household where the people have memory impairments, it's wonderful that they remember who she is and ask when she will return."

In recent weeks, visitation restrictions have eased, allowing Susan and her harp to return to campus. Meghan Mays, Activities Coordinator in healthcare, shared, "They [residents] have been excited to see Susan back in person! I think it's been a light at the end of a long tunnel.

"Susan has been playing for a program that I call 'hallway harp' keeping the social distance regulations, and still providing music, ministry and reflections. There's reminiscing, conversation, peace and comfort, and friendship! So glad she is back with us as part of the recreational programing for our dear residents!"

Providing this uplifting program has always required extra financial support. Donors have contributed more than \$25,000 over the years to help maintain this ministry. Recognizing the value of this program, the WCL Foundation Board endorsed the need to solicit family members and residents to consider making gifts to support the Music Ministry again this year. The response from donors was swift and true, raising more than \$10,000.

Anne Waters Dowd and Kim Waters Keriakos, daughters of resident Margaret Waters, have supported this program from its inception and made donations to the 2020 music appeal. Anne noted, "The sound of music would be greatly missed in the Westminster Canterbury community if not for Susan Carol. My sister and I are thankful for the opportunity to help support her music ministry by financial contributions and personal encouragement. We look forward to many years of participation to insure that all residents and guests of WC enjoy the gift of Susan Carol's presence on campus now and in the future."