

Bedside musicians aim to soothe those who are suffering, dying

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POSTED: 12/06/2015 08:00:00 AM MST



From left to right, Sally Kornblith, Linda Klein, and Louise Knapp, of the Threshold Singers, sing to a resident of Balfour Senior Living facility on Monday. For more photos go to www.dailycamera.com Paul Aiken Staff Photographer November 30, 2015

Photos: Threshold Singers at Balfour Senior Living





Carolyn Kuban, shown playing the harp for patrons at Osmosis Gallery in Niwot, says music sometimes gives the dying "the last ability to move on." (Matthew Jonas / Staff Photographer)

Carolyn Kuban's favorite audience is not in a fancy, famous concert hall.

It is a single person, eyes closed, in a private room. Sometimes, Kuban's harp music is the last sound the person hears.

[Kuban, of Boulder, plays music for people on their deathbed.](#)

"It's not uncommon for a person to die on the same day I was there, as if the music gave them the last ability to move on," she says. "Sometimes the people in the room are very demonstrative. Maybe the music gives them permission to cry, because the music is crying itself a little bit."

Although she works alone, Kuban is among a number of local musicians who perform bedside for ill and dying people.

Two such groups in Boulder County are the [Moon Over Mountains Threshold Choir](#) and [Boulder Threshold Singers](#).

The Boulder Threshold Singers, made up of about 20 volunteers, perform in small groups in private homes, hospitals and retirement communities every week.

Beside the Threshold groups, it's not rare to hear a soft strumming or singing in the room of a hospice patient.

The National Institutes of Health cites multiple studies on the topic of music therapy in end-of-life care. Studies have shown that music therapy can help pain, physical discomfort, fatigue, anxiety, mood, spirituality, energy, relaxation, duration of treatment and the overall quality of life, the NIH reports.

Although the NIH notes that further quantitative research is needed, it reports that music therapy in hospices and hospices is a service growing in popularity. Locally, too.

Kuban attended the Eastman School of Music in New York, then studied music therapy at Colorado State University, where she says she learned about how harmony affects emotion.

"The brain's neural pathway directly connects the auditory system with the limbic system, which includes the emotional center of the brain, the amygdala," Kuban says. "Sound information — in this case, music — is processed in this pre-cortical system even before consciousness, via the

frontal lobes of the cortex, has time to register it. Hence the direct connection between music and emotion."

She performed harp in multiple orchestras and symphonies, including the Colorado Symphony and Colorado Music Festival, but in the back of her mind, Kuban says, she always had a calling to explore how to use music to help people more directly.

Kuban first performed for a dying person, a relative, in 2000.



Boulder Threshold Singers such as Sally Kornblith, left, Linda Klein, center, and Louise Knapp sing in private homes, hospitals and retirement communities, like Balfour Senior Living facility in this photo. (Paul Aiken / Staff Photographer)

"I thought maybe I'd be freaked out or something by doing that," she says.

But instead, she says, she found a way to communicate with her loved one, when no one else could. And she says she could physically see the pain relief.

A growing number of studies support the idea that music can ease pain.

One study published in *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* noted that music can affect the limbic system, sparking real neurochemical changes — including the inhibition of stress hormones (and stress has been shown to increase experiences of pain) and the release of opioids, our naturally occurring painkillers.

"The music dissipates the pain," Kuban says. "Their breath might slow down, hands might unclench. It's fascinating for me to watch the effect that music can have almost instantly."

She believes the harp is especially effective because it has no "sharp edges." It seamlessly enters the space, and the vibrations stretch out into long, comforting rings, she says. Sometimes, she says, she places the harp next to a person's ear so they can feel the resonance, too.

When a person is actively dying, Kuban says, a musician must stay intuitive and flexible, able to change instantly if the breathing picks up or a melody appears to make a person anxious. Often, the simple, slow arrhythmic chords with no beat seem to be the most comforting.

"They are languid, and it's easy to let timelessness come into the space of the room. It's very spiritual at that point for me," Kuban says. "It's like playing the Pied Piper, pulling the person along with these harmonies and hoping their spirit and mood will be affected in a spiritual, personal and

meaningful way."



Carolyn Kuban first performed for a dying person in 2000. (Matthew Jonas / Staff Photographer)

Music can provide comfort for grieving loved ones, too.

Kuban recalls when one woman asked her to play a specific hymn whose chorus was about coming home. The woman's 25-year-old son, in his battle with leukemia, was not particularly religious, but the family requested the song for their comfort, Kuban says.

She strummed the last verse.

"All of the sudden there was this hush. And then crying. A different kind of crying. 'Keening,' that's what I call it. A moaning. A crying that's more than crying," Kuban says. "As I played the last verse, the child had died."

In a way, she says, a song can become a tether to the person who has left.

"It becomes almost a solid object, even though it's a memory," Kuban says.

Patty Petersen, of Boulder, says she believes music can penetrate deeper than any other form of communication. She realized the power of music when her partner, Robin Hammer, was diagnosed with bone cancer.

Hammer's last outing was to see the musical, "West Side Story," before her condition deteriorated.

"She couldn't get out of bed. What could I do?" Petersen says. "My friends came over and ... at one point, we just decided to try singing with her."

For hours on Sundays, they went through the pages of a folk music book, Petersen says.

"The pain was usually so bad that it was visible, but when we would sing, she would be a whole different person. It was so clearly taking away the pain for her," Petersen says.

Hammer died in the spring of 2012.

A few months later, the founder of the international Threshold Choir visited Boulder to start a branch, the Boulder Threshold Singers. Petersen immediately volunteered.

"I do believe music has a way of resonating somewhere on that soul level," she says. "Music can reach places that words can't. Nothing else can get there."

Today, the Threshold Choir has more than 100 chapters around the world.

Volunteers don't just learn the songs. They learn about the dying process from a hospice doctor. The national choir has annual gatherings and specific protocols about what singers can and cannot do. No caretaking, plumping pillows, giving water. Just singing.

They sing songs specifically written for the Threshold singers. Short, repetitive, soothing songs that Petersen says she hopes help people let go and transport to a peaceful place. Choosing unknown songs ensures there will be no previous emotional connection to the music, either negative (sparking anxiety) or positive (which could make it harder for someone to "leave").

The Boulder Threshold Singers meet monthly to talk about [death and dying](#), and they visit local "death cafes" and meetings to talk about experiences and their own concerns and fears. On Dec. 11, they will attend a "remembrance event," hosted by [Conversations on Death](#), about dealing with the loss of loved ones over the holidays.

"In our culture, we spend a lot of time around birth events, but we aren't very attentive to people when they're going through the dying passage, and it's a really important time," Petersen says. "It deserves dignity. It deserves honor."

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Groups like the Boulder Threshold Singers — from left to right, Sally Kornblith, Linda Klein and Louise Knapp, singing to a resident at Balfour Senior Living facility — perform music for people who are ailing or dying. (Paul Aiken / Staff Photographer)