



News at IU Bloomington

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Service-learning course reaches local residents with memory loss through music

BY MARY KECK

April 12, 2017



With the shades drawn and the lights dimmed, students in Jennie Gubner's Music and Memory class sit in a circle and watch a film.

It shows an older adult man seated in a chair. He's wearing headphones, but there is no sound. His eyes are closed. He might even be asleep.

Then, his hand twitches, and his eyes open. He starts singing.

All around the classroom, Gubner's students are smiling.



Jennie Gubner. Photo by James Brosher, IU Communications

The power of music

In less than a minute, the power of music is illustrated in a video featuring an individual with dementia or Alzheimer's disease at a local health care facility in Bloomington.

Gubner's service-learning course is a mix of neuroscience, ethnomusicology, film workshop, health care studies and so much more.

"It's an interdisciplinary, hands-on course," she said. "We explore the relationship between music, memory and the brain through fieldwork, filmmaking and service work in the local Bloomington community."

Gubner is a visiting lecturer in the Department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology and taught Music and Memory for the first time at IU Bloomington this spring. Throughout the course, her 18 students visit with about 18 local residents who are in nursing homes or involved in senior adult programs -- the majority of whom have been diagnosed with dementia or Alzheimer's disease.

The students work in pairs and meet with the older adult, their family and the facility's staff to make a personalized music playlist that can be kept on an iPod after the class has finished.

They also record their interactions with the senior citizens on video and keep a hand-written log of their weekly visits.

Their films show older adults swaying from side-to-side, singing along to Frank Sinatra's "The Way You Look Tonight" and dancing to Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire."

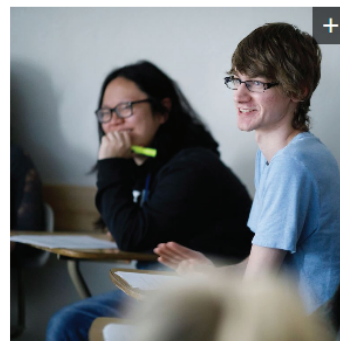
While listening to a familiar tune may seem like a simple way to pass the time, it's doing much more than that for the senior citizens the students are interacting with.

"We're not just doing it for fun, because it's a nice idea or because we need to fill people's time," said Cathleen Weber, owner and executive director of the [Better Day Club](#), an adult day program in Bloomington partnering with Gubner's class. "This becomes something really useful and adaptable to them for the remainder of their disease process."

The students create a personalized music history for the people they are interacting with. Listening to the music brings the senior citizens joy, but it can also be calming and bring them back to themselves, she said.

"Music works in a different part of our brains than our language center, and as a result, it is accessible to us long after our expressive abilities and language erodes through the process of dementia," Weber said. "Music does not replace all medication, but it can certainly alleviate some of the symptoms and the challenges that we traditionally use medicine for."

Once the playlists are done, Gubner and her students spend time talking with residents, caregivers, family and staff to advocate the use of these playlists as a targeted approach to combatting anxiety, depression, memory loss, and other symptoms associated with dementia and Alzheimer's like sundowning, a syndrome of Alzheimer's when people tend to feel much worse around dusk and can become agitated. This shift, from understanding music solely as a form of entertainment, to embracing its ability to actively promote health and wellness, is at the heart of the culture change Gubner is working to promote.



At the start of the class, students supplied the older adult and their families with a questionnaire that asked about preferred styles of music, favorite artists or genres and, most importantly, if there are particular songs or artists associated with moments in their lives.

As the older adult listens to a certain tune or artist, they return to the moment when they danced at their wedding, when they turned on the radio during their first date or when they attended their first concert live.

Reality is a roller coaster

Back in Gubner's classroom, sophomore Nathan Siddell talked about the film he just shared of the 101-year-old who seemingly woke up and began singing.

"He's usually very taciturn, reserved," Siddell said. "It was fun to actually get something out of him when he was listening to the music."

The field work Gubner's students are doing isn't always fun, however. While they often see breakthroughs with the people they're working with and are excited to interact with them each week, they are also faced with the reality of the populations they work with.

Maggie Kennedy, a freshman studying neuroscience, shared a video clip of her interview with a husband who spoke candidly about his wife's experience with Alzheimer's, and the reasons he decided to sign her up for the Music and Memory program.

"The idea is to have joy and to have pleasure, because frankly, if you are in her position where you can only look forward to losing one faculty after another, there really is no purpose in living," he said.

"The disease is like a roller coaster," Kennedy said when she explained why she chose to share the clip with her classmates. "It was very real, and I think it was very important."

For freshman Emily Mangione, it was her firsthand experience with Alzheimer's that made her want to join the class.

"My grandma has Alzheimer's and has been in a nursing home," she said. "She was in a band; my family is musical. At family parties, I can see how music affects her. It changes her mood."

Mangione, a pre-nursing major, plans to go home and use what she's learned in Gubner's class to help her grandmother and to try to get the Music and Memory Program implemented at her nursing home.

Expanding Music and Memory

Gubner's course is based on the [Music and Memory Program](#) offered by a nonprofit organization developed by social worker Dan Cohen. Through her service-learning course, Gubner has helped to get two facilities in Bloomington certified in the program.

"There were no facilities in the Bloomington area certified when I was offered this job last spring," Gubner said. "After months of phone calls and meetings explaining the benefits of the program, I was delighted to find immediate support from Cathleen Weber at the Better Day Club and Meghan Yoder at Gentry Park Senior Living."

The certification for a large facility is \$1,000 and includes training the facility's staff, ongoing online support and resources, and the cost of some iPods. For many facilities, the cost is too much.

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Cathleen Weber

Gubner's students have become so passionate about their work in the class that they've started a Music and Memory Club at IU. They have also created their own [GoFundMe site](#) with a goal of

raising \$2,500 by the end of the semester to certify two more Bloomington facilities in the program.

The motivation of Gubner's students to raise awareness is a reflection of the excitement they feel during the class as they develop relationships with the individuals they are working with.

"The work they are doing and the films they are producing are phenomenal," Gubner said. "They are very emotional coming out of the field. They want to share these experiences and stories with others, and film gives them the opportunity to do so."

"I think the students have been joyfully and happily surprised at how much these older adults have to offer," Weber said. "They have so much richness to share. A number of people who attend the club are retired professors from the university or retired teachers in the community. It has helped to reposition them in that role. They are teaching the students about different aspects of their lives and talking about history through their music."

Gubner will teach the Music and Memory course in the fall. For more information or to donate a used iPod, contact her at jgubner@indiana.edu.