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‘Special talent’

Aultman’s music therapist soothes patients with song

Ed Balint Canton Repository | USA TODAY NETWORK

CANTON – Isabel Soehnlen strummed an acoustic guitar and swayed to the beat while singing the Tom Petty song, “Wildflowers.” • Her fingers moved effortlessly over the strings as she performed not in a concert hall, not in a bar, not in an amphitheater but at Aultman Hospital. • “*You belong among the wildflowers. You belong somewhere close to me. Far away from your trouble and worry. You belong somewhere you feel free.*” • Soehnlen has been a full-time music therapist at Aultman since 2022, with her live performances juxtaposed against a backdrop of medical diagnoses, machinery, electronic devices and medication. What she provides isn’t in the form of a pill or syringe. • She’s the hospital’s jukebox of hope, and her impact can be profound, according to patients and hospital staff.

“Anxiety is the same whether you’re in the hospital or not,” the 30-year-old Soehnlen said. “Music is still a valid intervention. In difficult times of illness, transition or loss, music connects people to themselves and to others. It gives them a space to express and reflect and feel heard.”

Music therapy dates to ancient Greece and in modern times has been used in numerous ways, ranging from calming psychi-

atric patients to soothing soldiers following physical and emotional trauma. Today, there are more than 26,000 music therapists in the United States.

It’s growing in practice at medical facilities around the country. In addition to Aultman, Cleveland Clinic offers music therapy at many of its Northeast Ohio locations,

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Music therapist Isabel Soehnlen plays a song outside Aultman Hospital’s Timken Family Cancer Center. Music therapy is used for cancer and hospice patients and has numerous medical benefits, including both physically and mentally.

JULIE VENNITTI BOTOS/
CANTON REPOSITORY



GETTY IMAGES

New Stark County natural gas aggregation rates set

Bills to change for those enrolled in the program

Grace Springer
Canton Repository
USA TODAY NETWORK

Natural gas bills are about to change for those enrolled in the Stark County natural gas aggregation program.

Whether your bill will go up or down depends on your provider.

The rate for Enbridge Gas Ohio customers is increasing from \$3.29/Mcf to \$4.65/Mcf. The rate for Columbia Gas of Ohio customers is decreasing from \$0.808/Ccf to \$0.674/Ccf.

Eric Burns, director of aggregation and sales at Independent Energy Consultants, wrote in an email that the difference can be attributed to timing.

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Isabel Soehnlen, music therapist at Aultman Hospital in Canton, plays a song. She uses music to connect with patients and reduce their stress and anxiety while providing comfort during difficult times. PHOTOS BY JULIE VENNITTI BOTOS/CANTON REPOSITORY

Music therapy

Continued from Page 1A

including at its main hospital, Akron General and Cleveland Clinic Children’s, as well as for hospice care, and at its Avon, Euclid and Hillcrest hospitals.

Akron-based Summa Health offers music therapy in partnership with the Akron Symphony to improve mental health. Akron Children’s Hospital and the Cleveland-based University Hospitals also have programs.

Aultman provides music therapy to cancer and hospice patients free of charge through the support of donors. Soehnlen usually plays songs inside the hospital’s Timken Family Cancer Center. Patients, employees and visitors train their ears to the soothing melodies, soulful vocals and resonant guitar chords.

“I feel that she has been given a gift and special talent because it’s really a gift from God,” Aultman nurse Jennifer Holb said. “And I really tear up every time I hear her.”

Music therapy touches the soul

New cancer patients are often nervous and anxious before treatment, said Holb of Massillon.

“It’s the unknown,” she said.

Soehnlen’s music is calming, and patients sometimes sing along.

“You can almost just watch, and the patient, they’re tense and then they just relax,” Holb said. “It’s really



Sandra Lang of Canton discusses the benefits of the music therapy program at the Timken Family Cancer Center at Aultman Hospital.

awesome to witness.”

Special moments include when a patient sang along with Soehnlen while she played the gospel hymn, “In the Garden.”

“It touched my soul,” Holb said.

‘It’s a ministry as well.’

Medical research and studies have proven the

benefits of music therapy, including cognitively, lowering heart rates and blood pressure, alleviating anxiety, reducing stress, coping with pain, improving mental health, enhancing communication and social skills, and fostering connection by experiencing music with others.

Music therapy is a clinical application and part of a larger treatment plan, said Soehnlen, who is nationally credentialed by the Certification Board for Music Therapists and is also licensed as a music therapist through the state of Ohio. It also complements other treatments and services such as counseling, dieticians, the hospital chaplain, and infusion therapy and chemotherapy for cancer patients.

“Patients are given autonomy to choose music that validates their current experience or music that shifts their mood and perspective,” Soehnlen said.

Music can be especially meaningful and comforting for hospice patients.

“The patient and I may spend time reminiscing on songs from their childhood, singing hymns or favorite songs or creating a legacy project such as writing an original song or creating a voice recording paired with music to give to their loved ones,” Soehnlen said.

“The reward is their appreciation that they can’t even put into words,” she said.

Music also helps when patients feel alone.

“It breaks my heart when someone is by themselves,” Holb said. “(Soehnlen’s) title is music therapist but it’s a ministry as well. The patients look forward to seeing her.

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Music therapy

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“Her music touches lives. I had a patient stay after their treatment to hear Isabel sing.”

From Elvis to Taylor Swift

Soehnlén, who lives in Navarre, grew up with music in her family. Her mother loved country.

She remembers singing a Faith Hill song around the house as a toddler. Some of Soehnlén’s music is available on streaming platforms. Her sister, Annuel Soehnlén, is also a musician.

Isabel Soehnlén, who graduated with a degree in commercial music from Belmont University in Nashville, said she develops a “therapeutic relationship” with patients.

“It’s a privilege to be invited into their scary moments,” said the Fairless High School graduate, who also completed Belmont’s music therapy equivalency program.

Soehnlén said she matches her songs with the emotions of a patient. Her repertoire includes “Don’t Stop” and “Landslide” by Fleetwood Mac and “Let It Be” by The Beatles, as well songs by Alison Krauss and Michael W. Smith.

Musical tastes vary and can be surprising.

Soehnlén said an elderly woman enjoys hearing, “Undone – The Sweater Song” by the rock band Weezer. Other patients have requested hip-hop music and songs by Christian rock band Skillet, John Denver, Doris Day, Elvis, Garth Brooks, Tim McGraw, Eagles, Morgan Wallen, Post Malone, Alicia Keys and Taylor Swift.

She carries an iPad with her, which is stocked with hundreds of songs to aid her in meeting requests.

“If I don’t know a song, I’ll play the recorded song,” she said.

Music therapy: ‘It’s much more personal.’

Patients like Sandra K. Lang bask in the beauty of Soehnlén’s voice.

Lang, 71, of Canton, was diagnosed with endometrial cancer about 12 years ago. She’s the retired director of North Canton Public Library.

About two years ago, the cancer metastasized from her uterus to the lungs.

She undergoes infusion therapy treatments at Aultman’s cancer center every three weeks, up to five hours per session.

“I definitely enjoy her and appreciate her talent,” Lang said of Soehnlén. “Her repertoire is wonderful because she has such a broad range of genres.”

Music therapy is soothing, said Lang, who has a collection of CDs and vinyl records, including oldies like Harry Chapin and Ed Ames.

Contemporary favorites include Kacey Musgraves and Brandi Carlile.

“I have always been subject to white coat syndrome,” she said. “My blood pressure goes up. There’s a lot of anxiety with cancer treatment and the drug



Isabel Soehnlén, music therapist at Aultman Hospital in Canton, plays a song. She uses music to connect with patients and reduce their stress and anxiety while providing comfort during difficult times.

JULIE VENNITTI BOTOS/CANTON REPOSITORY

cocktail I’m on.

“I think it takes you out of yourself, and that’s one of the things that music performance does. Rarely do any of us get to have our own concert. Usually, we have to share it with thousands of people. I feel there is a connection, particularly with acoustic guitar. It’s much more personal.”

Art in action

Music therapy illustrates the power and reach of the arts, said Maureen Ater, CEO and president of the Canton-based ArtsinStark.

ArtsinStark, an advocate and supporter of the local arts, recently awarded a \$7,500 grant to Aultman to provide 100 hours of free music therapy sessions to cancer patients during infusion treatments.

This marks the second year Aultman’s music therapy program has received an ArtsinStark grant, which is awarded through an outside panel of regional arts and community leaders.

The program qualified because ArtsinStark supports “initiatives that use the arts to promote healing, connection, and improved quality of life,” Ater said.

“Beyond the physical benefits, music therapy encourages self-reflection, teaches healthy coping strategies, and increases motivation — all of which are especially meaningful for patients navigating the challenges of cancer care,” she said.

“Isabel’s experience is a powerful reminder of how

“The patient and I may spend time reminiscing on songs from their childhood, singing hymns or favorite songs or creating a legacy project such as writing an original song or creating a voice recording paired with music to give to their loved ones.”

Isabel Soehnlén, Music therapist



music can make a real difference, even in a medical setting. It shows that the arts go far beyond painting a canvas or visiting an exhibit.”

Soehnlén recognizes how essential music therapy is in medical settings.

“The need is so great that Aultman could keep four of me busy,” she said.

Reach Ed at 330-580-8315 and ebalint@gannett.com. Follow on Instagram at ed_balint and TikTok @edwardbalint

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