

22 March 2018

Spiritual Care Australia - Best of Care Awards 2018

Category: Outstanding Spiritual Care Team

Nominee: Mercy Health Aged & Community Care Pastoral Care Team and their use of the reverie harp in the residential aged care homes across Australia.

Question 1: Please summarise in a few words, using dot points, what particular qualities and initiatives have brought this nomination forward for our attention and celebration.



The reverie harp

- Mercy Health Aged & Community Care is committed to providing opportunities for people in its care to continue living meaningful lives that meet their spiritual and emotional needs.
- In order to enhance this care, the Mercy Health Aged Care Pastoral Care Team applied to The Mercy Health Foundation to fund the purchase of 18 reverie harps for each of Mercy Health's residential aged care homes across Australia. This was an initiative to further develop the role of music in end of life care.
- Music thanatology is a professional field that integrates music and medicine in end-of-life care. Music can bring solace, dignity and grace to those nearing the end of their lives. Music from a reverie harp is meditative and restful and enhances the delivery of emotional and spiritual care for the dying and their families. Peter Roberts, music thanatologist and creator of the reverie harp, says that playing the harp helps to give a patient a peace about dying:

“I’m saying, ‘This is all right, this can be a good place to rest into, and this deep restful place is, in fact, a beautiful place to go into at the very end’. I may be the only one in the room who is conveying that to the person. And I’ve learned that it is a really good thing to be saying to people, rather than you need to be fighting the end more or medicating it more, or trying more to treat it.”

Wiseman, H, 15 March 2017, *From music into silence; new documentary celebrates Peter Roberts’ courage and heart*, Palliative Care Australia, accessed 20 March 2018, <<http://palliativecare.org.au/music-silence-new-documentary-celebrates-peter-roberts-courage-heart>>

- The beauty of the reverie harp is that it can be played by anyone without training. The harp rests easily on a person’s lap or beside them if they are lying in bed. Gentle strumming of the harp produces soothing music to the person playing it and anyone who has the pleasure of listening in. Reverie harps are also used in kindergartens, yoga studios, nursing homes, hospices and hospitals.
- The Mercy Health Foundation partnered with one its donors, the late Betty Amsden AO, to deliver this project. Betty kindly funded the purchase of the reverie harps saying, “It’s an absolute pleasure to be involved in this project”.
- The Mercy Health Foundation was also privileged to work closely with reverie harp creator Peter Roberts. Peter personally demonstrated the reverie harp to Betty and Mercy Health’s pastoral carers at a team meeting in 2017. The enchantment that Betty expressed when strumming the reverie harp echoed the sentiments of a pastoral carer who said, “Even I, who can’t whistle a tune, came away so enriched in heart and soul”. Peter said he was delighted that his harps were finding their way into community organisations like Mercy Health where their benefit would be greatly felt.
- Finally, the team’s partnership with the Mercy Aged & Community Care Pastoral Care Manager Michael Taylor was key in determining the need for the harps and minimising risks associated with their placement in each of the aged care homes. The harps continue to deliver meditative and restful music while enhancing the emotional and spiritual care for the dying and their families.



Betty Amsden AO presenting the reverie harps to Mercy Health Aged & Community Care

Left to right: Mercy Health Residential Aged Care Manager Pastoral Services Michael Taylor, former Mercy Health Foundation Director Simon White, Mercy Health Foundation donor Betty Amsden AO, Mercy Health Aged & Community Care Chief Executive Kevin Mercer, music thanatologist and creator of the reverie harp Peter Roberts



Peter Roberts demonstrating the use of the harps to the Mercy Health Aged & Community Care Pastoral Care Team

Question 2: Provide specific examples of how the nominee has demonstrated their particular qualities or initiatives and the outcomes achieved in spiritual care for patients or clients, their families and the staff in their facility.

The pastoral carers have shared their experiences of introducing the reverie harp to residents and relatives in their homes. Their stories capture some of the many different ways in which the harp touches people.

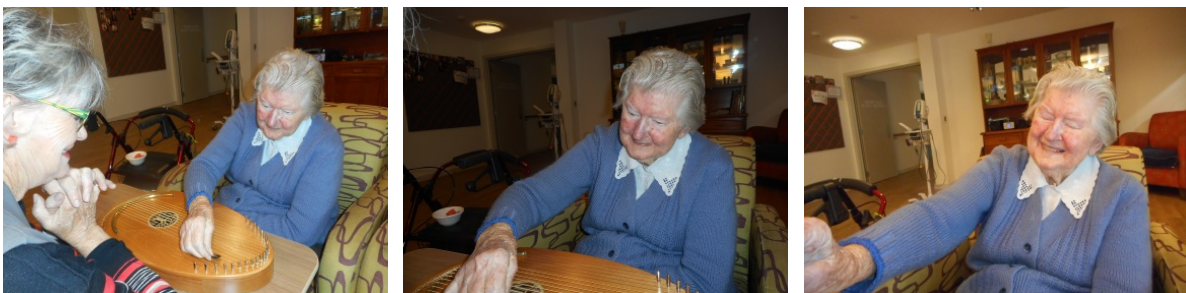
Pastoral Carer Felicity Barker explains the delight that the reverie harp gives to a 90 year-old resident at Mercy Place Warrnambool:

“I play a few notes on the reverie harp and I immediately have her attention as she looks up with intrigue to the source of the captivating music. I strum again and the smile starts to break through, so I position the harp on her lap and gently place her hands across the strings. The hands are still – relaxed — so I start to pluck and strum, and the room is immediately illuminated by that unforgettable smile. And then came her word — the same word over and over and over again — ‘Beautiful! Beautiful! Beautiful!’ And it truly was a beautiful moment in time.”

Pastoral Carer Carmel Williams speaks of the joy that the harp gives to residents, including Nancy, one of the residents at Mercy Health Bethlehem Home for the Aged in Bendigo:

“The reverie harp is wonderful for group session and engaging residents who are able to use it, but the most powerful and spiritual moments seem to occur when people who were previously very passive and unaware come to life when they connect with the harp.

Nancy is one of these residents who would sit and watch harp sessions but would never join in. Nancy has quite advanced dementia and is naturally quiet and retiring. I tried for many months to get Nancy to touch the harp and came up with the idea of putting a plectrum in her hand and gently plucking the strings. After letting me guide her a couple of times, she then pulled her hand away and began playing herself. I think the pictures below of myself and Nancy show what a transformation there was and how much joy Nancy gets from her now weekly harp sessions.”



Pastoral Care Worker Carmel Williams loves to see the joy on resident Nancy’s face when she plays the reverie harp

Pastoral Carer Liz Grogan from Southern Cross Care in Shepparton (Mercy Health and Southern Cross Care Shepparton merged their operations in 2017) talks about the power of the harp to transport a person experiencing grief into a place of beauty and wonder:

“I shared the harp with a recently widowed man (see photo below) who was sitting in the lounge area as he stared at his hands, disengaged and full of sadness as he was unable to grasp what has happened in his life to result in him being cared for by us rather than the wife he so adored. With the harp in his lap, he was soon lost in exploring the sounds he could create with ease. Whilst he was playing this, he was able to make something happen, he could create sounds and he could explore and play in a way which transported him beyond the lounge area to an experience of beauty and wonder.”



Mercy Place Rice Village’s Pastoral Carer Geraldine Malady illustrates the soothing impact that the harp had on a distressed resident, Parvin, as well as the change in her daughter, Mahbod, and Mahbod’s understanding of the role of pastoral care:

“I entered Parvin’s room and she was sitting, crying, and she proceeded to tell me the news that her husband had just died. He had actually passed away some years previously. My heart ached for her as she stated that she had to get to him and her family to let them know. As I shifted the conversation into reminiscing about the things they used to do together, where they met, what was important for her in her life, what her adult children are doing and grandchildren, her mood began to change.

I opened the bag the harp was carried in and Parvin’s eyes became filled with surprise and mystery. I gently strummed the strings and showed her how beautiful and calming it is to experience. No need for lessons or anything involved....just strum gently to take you to a sanctuary of peace.

Parvin’s whole persona changed. It was as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

My service manager, Bernadette, encouraged me to ring Parvin’s daughter, Mahbod and let her know that I visited Parvin. It was Bernadette who initially told me of Mahbod’s concern that the home only cared for people who were

Catholic. Bernadette assured Mahbod that pastoral care is for every resident, not just Catholics. Bernadette stated that Mahbod became emotional and felt happier knowing her mother is provided with pastoral support and that Parvin responded so well on hearing the sounds of the harp. When I phoned Mahbod she cried over the phone, feeling reassured that as pastoral carers we have no agenda of our own when we visit our residents. We are there to support and show empathy for all.”

Finally, the photo below of Pastoral Carer Martin Dean with resident Kath at Mercy Place Westcourt (Cairns) further illustrates how much enjoyment residents get from gently strumming the reverie harp.



Question 3: Provide details of how the nominee has contributed to team relationships, to staff perceptions, to public awareness and to the overall work of pastoral and spiritual care in this facility.

The reverie harp has had a very positive impact on team and resident family relationships. Team and family relationships are improved because the residents feel happier and calmer after engaging with the harp. The lifestyle staff at our aged care homes also use the harp with the residents and comment on the soothing atmosphere it creates when they are preparing different activities with residents. In the photo below, Lifestyle Coordinator Annette at Mercy Place Mandurah (WA) is playing the harp while Pastoral Carer Sr Lien Pham prepares to lead the residents in a weekly prayer service. Annette says the harp creates a reflective atmosphere and helps the residents to settle prior to the service.



Left to right: resident at Mercy Place Mandurah and Lifestyle Coordinator Annette. Pastoral Carer Sr Lien preparing the prayer service.

Sean Moore, the pastoral carer at Mercy Place Woree (Cairns), has demonstrated the harp with volunteers at their regular meeting. Two volunteers, Sharleen and Anne, now share the harp with residents during their weekly visits to the home. The volunteers have gained confidence in using the harp and allowing residents to enjoy the sounds and memories it evokes. Below is a picture of resident Lena and Sean enjoying the harp together.



Pastoral Carer Liz Grogan at Southern Cross Care Shepparton reflects on why the harp is so successful in helping to build relationships between people. Liz says the harp acts as a leveller because no musical ability is required to play it:

“I carry my ‘magic harp’ with confidence through the building, although I am not a musician. This is not an instrument I play for others; it is not something I ‘do’ for them. I have come to realise that with the harp between us, I can come alongside our residents in a genuine and curious way as we explore its possibilities together. The harp is a leveller and a source of wonder and delight. In an environment where so much is done for our residents, where they rely on the education, experience and training of the staff for their care, the harp creates a place where it is okay not to be an expert or in control. It allows me and those I come alongside to admit we don’t know what we are doing but can still create beautiful sounds together. I feel so very grateful for

the unexpected and valuable gifts of spontaneity, beauty and honesty that this dear instrument offers me as I incorporate it into my pastoral practice and all that it reveals in my encounters with those I meet.”

Question 4: Provide any specific feedback testimonials, or recognition by patients, clients or within the organisation, for these qualities, or initiatives for pastoral/spiritual care by this person or team.

As cited in the answer to Question 1, Betty Amsden AO and Peter Roberts strongly endorsed this project as a way of nurturing the spiritual wellbeing of patients in residential aged care. The Mercy Health Aged Care Pastoral Care team agree that the reverie harp is a very useful tool in helping older people transcend their experience of loss and grief.

However, the most compelling endorsements of the reverie harps come from the Pastoral carers, residents and family members who use them. Here are some further examples.

Pastoral Carer Marie Brennan from Mercy Place Parkville says:

“I often sit in the memory unit and play the harp when people are restless. Many find this soothing and they relax and their behaviour patterns change. Sometimes we sing familiar hymns or songs and they remember times that have passed when music was a big part in their lives. At Christmas I sat with an Irishman who was on an end-of-life pathway and sang *Silent Night*. His wife commented that he couldn’t hear me but he raised his hand and waved, too tired to open his eyes or speak, because he wanted us to know he heard the carol. He died a few days later. At the funeral, his wife commented on how he loved my singing and harp-playing. He had been in an Irish band and loved our reverie harp.

If I visit residents on an end-of-life pathway and there are grandchildren present, I often teach them to use the harp. They tell me how it helped them cope with the length of time they were sitting and makes it special for them to do something for their beloved Grandparent“.



Pastoral Carer Marie Brennan and residents at Mercy Place Parkville enjoying the reverie harp

Pastoral Carer Patrick Comarmond from Mercy Place East Melbourne is moved by the power of the harp to create a sense of calm and serenity:

“Earlier in the month, having just received the reverie harp, I took it around and had numerous positive encounters with residents. Valda, one of the patients, took particular interest in the harp, smiling and becoming more alert and interested in it as I placed it on her chest while she was lying in her tub chair by the window in the sun. She took to it quite comfortably and described the music played as soothing. After a few minutes of me demonstrating the harp, Valda placed her fingers on the strings and attempted to play. After a little help from me we were playing together. Valda spoke no words but there was a beautiful expression of calmness on her face. What seemed to be a peaceful, gentle joy came over her. For me there were tears of amazement and how unique this moment was! For Valda’s health had been declining over the last few months and to see her find life and joy during this time was very powerful.”

Finally, in the following story from Pastoral Carer Teresa Rose at Edgewater Hostel WA, a resident who is so enraptured with the harp introduces it to her friend:

“One of our residents is a Scottish lady who has worked in pastoral care herself in hospitals in the UK. Most recently she worked as a volunteer at our local hospital. She came for her tour of Edgewater on Melbourne Cup Day, and our service manager introduced her to the reflection room and asked me to show her the reverie harp. This lady was overcome with emotion at the sound and began to play it herself. Since moving in, she has walked herself down to the reflection room every day to spend time playing the harp. She has declined my offer to bring it to her in her room. She is so enraptured with it that she demonstrated it to her friend who visited. This lady then went and ordered one for herself and the two of them played together. The resident has since been trying to persuade other residents and staff to use the harp.”

When accompanied by an attitude of compassion and an attentive, loving presence, the effects of soothing music for a person who is dying can be profound. The person is drawn into the depths of the music and may experience a sense of infinity when the notes are played up the musical scale. The person being played to can be left in a state of reverie and be able to rest in a comfortable deep silence. Such is the power of the reverie harp.