



# Elders using music to tap into memory

**Alternative therapy aims help recovery in dementia patients**

By **Phylicia Davidson** | April 17, 2016





Photo: Melissa Phillip, Staff



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**IMAGE 1 OF 2**

Walter Jones, a patient at Holly Hall retirement community, is among those participating in the music and memory program. Jones is among the few participants without dementia.

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Ninety five year-old Niels Nielsen's red iPod Shuffle loops between sermons and symphonies.

The former professor and voice of the religious community at Rice University for four decades is on a journey to rediscover himself through music through a so-called music and memory program at Holly Hall retirement community in southwest Houston.

"Music promotes insight," said Nielsen, now diagnosed with dementia. "Music promotes harmony, understanding and it's a new adventure. Some things you don't know about 'til you have experienced them, like why people are moved by music only by listening to it. It helps me and I get something from it."

Holly Hall was among 32 Texas facilities to receive the music and memory program in May 2015 as part of a one-year pilot by the Texas Department of Aging and Disability Services. State officials announced last week that the program will be expanded to more than 400 Texas nursing home facilities by April 2018.



Participants receive an iPod Shuffle with 150 tracks catered to their taste. The hope is that the music serves as alternative therapy, calming and connecting them so they no longer need antipsychotic medications.

"The goal is that once they have been introduced to the music, whatever behaviors were warranting the use of anti-psychotics will begin to be reduced, eventually coming off of those medicines completely," said Michelle Dionne-Vahalik, director of quality monitoring program for the state department. "Because the music and memory program is replacing that medication intervention with a musical therapeutic intervention."

### ***Emotions still 'intact'***

At Holly Hall, antipsychotic use was significantly reduced among the 15 participating patients, according to the University of Texas Health Sciences Center at Houston School of Nursing.

Music helps people connect to what they value, experts said.

"It's involuntarily prompting them to have positive memories," said Dr. Holly Carlson Zhao, a neuropsychologist at Center for Optimal Brain Health, located in the Galleria area. "It can do things that are helpful that might improve people's mood, facilitate their ability to communicate with loved ones and communicate with themselves, which they sometimes feel might be disappearing."

Dan Cohen, founding executive director of New York based-Music & Memory, Inc., was inspired to develop the program by his passion for '60s music. He found 16,000 nursing homes that were not utilizing iPod technology and his volunteer efforts moved the needle toward worldwide access to the program.

"Why do we listen to music? It's just something magical. We don't understand how it changes us. Decades from now we will still love the music then as we do now, even with dementia," said Cohen. "Even though with dementia, your short-term and long-term memory is compromised, but your emotional system is very much intact. "

Seeing is believing for Bill Gandon, a former student of Nielsen's and associate pastor for congregational care and senior adults at St. Paul's United Methodist Church.

As dementia set in, Gandon "resigned to ministering to someone other than the Dr. Niels Nielsen so many of us had known and loved."

After months of music therapy, Nielsen's progress shocked Gandon.

"Have you had met him before, you could not have believed the state he had gotten to," said Gandon. "For me to be able to finally look into Nielsen's eyes, and see absolutely clear that he was right on topic, it was remarkable. ... I can just about say that he wasn't there, and now he is."

Jherick Gutierrez, director of health care at Holly Hall, has embraced his role as a walking music library. He spends his time meeting with patients and tailoring their playlists to their personalities.

"We have to find techniques to reach people. Music and memory has given me the opportunity to reach past being an administrator. I'm their 'music man,' " said Gutierrez. "After so many conversations with Mr. Nielsen about music, he looks at me and says 'You're my friend now.' That just touches me every day."

***'Incredible to see'***

The music and memory program is being administered foremost to patients with dementia, but has provided other patients a way to cope with losing independence in their elder years.

Walter Jones, a former principal and coach at Ross Sterling High School lost his faith in returning home after he fell and was injured. Physical therapists said that the 92-year-old would need to reside at the home much longer than expected.

Jones's family became advocates of the program and provided an iPod for their father; Gutierrez loaded the play list full of swing, big band and Artie Shaw. After hearing the sounds of his past and the memories of coaching high school football, Jones was at ease.

"Music can make you or break you," said Jones. "It's an emotional thing for me, we used to listen to swing before every big game. But the longest song ever written was basically our national anthem. It was always funny to see the boys so anxious before the game, just waiting to play."

His reaction has been astounding, Gutierrez said.

"There was excitement in his eyes and the tears just started falling down," he said. "It was incredible to see."

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