

MUSIC

On Christmas Day 1996, Sharilyn Cohn sat down in her Georgia home to watch a special episode of ABC's *Nightline*. Little did she know her life was about to be uprooted.

Host Ted Koppel was doing a feature on music thanatology, the ancient practice of playing music at the bedside of someone who is dying. He profiled the Chalice of Repose School of Music Thanatology in Missoula, Mont., where musicians earn a graduate degree in this unique form of palliative care.

Cohn was no fledgling in the world of music. As a professional cellist, she was a member of several high-profile orchestras in Atlanta and Memphis, Tenn., and performed with artists such as Sammy Davis Jr., John Denver, the Moody Blues and Frank Sinatra. Also the founder of a successful distribution corporation, Cohn was doing pretty well for herself.

But soon she was packing her bags and heading to Montana. "Somehow I knew I had to go," she says.

Across the nation in Portland, Ore., vocalist Barbara Cabot watched the same program and had the same reaction. "I was drawn, and I had to go," says Cabot, whose previous career was in banking. Serendipity was at work. Both women not only discovered a life path but each other.

After graduating from the two-year program, Cohn and Cabot moved to Portland and founded SacredFlight, a Portland-based nonprofit organization that offers music vigils for end-of-life care.

Music thanatology is a subspecialty of palliative care in which harp and voice help reduce anxiety and fear and even decrease pain. Practitioners are trained in the prescriptive qualities of music and silence. After gathering both medical and personal information about a patient, they conduct 45- to 60-minute "vigils" at the

A call to a new anthem

Musicians offer peace and healing at end of life

BY MEG DALY

patient's bedside, choosing music to respond dynamically to the patient's individual needs and symptoms.

"We marry the knowledge of how music can affect the body with principles of end-of-life care," says Cohn. "Although there is a clinical aspect to our music, it is also profoundly spiritual."

Cohn and Cabot each arrived at Chalice of Repose out of a desire to do hospice work with music. Neither woman had anticipated finding love, but the pair quickly formed a strong connection.

When asked about how being a lesbian factors into her practice, Cohn responds: "I wonder if people who are marginalized have an opportunity for more capacity to be compassionate. We know what it's like to be quickly judged or condemned."

SacredFlight is composed of four individuals, three of whom happen to be queer. Vocalist Gary Plouff, who graduated from Chalice of Repose in 1996, joined Cohn and Cabot's group in 2002. The fourth member is violist Anna Fiasco.



From left: Sharilyn Cohn, Barbara Cabot and Gary Plouff provide end-of-life music care with SacredFlight

Plouff echoes Cohn's sentiments about the relationship between sexual orientation and healing. "My own struggles growing up gay has something to do with my compassion for others' struggles," he explains.

A patient can request a vigil at any point after receiving a terminal diagnosis. Their needs may change depending on where they are in the dying process. Music thanatology

is also helpful for family and friends of dying patients.

"I've seen healing occur," says Cabot, "both emotional and spiritual, within a person and within families. People can gain acceptance and experience reconciliation."

Plouff says vigils "offer patients and their families a framework that weaves them together." He says music is often the key that helps people unlock difficult emotions.

Cabot feels privileged that people "allow us to be there with them at that time in their lives. It's a wondrous thing."

Being so often in the realm of the dying does not seem to have taken a toll on the members of SacredFlight. On the contrary, each of them speaks with a resonant peace and calm that comes from deep satisfaction.

"I've never found it depressing," says Plouff. "The music has properties that feed you and heal you while you are supporting others. Also, being aware of the impermanence of life has made me appreciate life more."

SacredFlight does not charge for vigils. Instead, the group partners with hospitals and care facilities, which cover some of the costs. It has applied for an Equity Foundation grant that would go toward serving the queer community, and private donations are much needed. The group also hopes to partner with local HIV/AIDS service organizations in the coming year.

In the meantime, Cohn devotes full-time work to SacredFlight, while the others keep their day jobs. But their focus remains clear. As Plouff notes, "Music is my life." □

To request a vigil or make a donation, contact SACREDFLIGHT at 503-241-3344, donate@sacredflight.org or www.sacredflight.org.

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