

Mary Sue Wilkinson



Frequently Asked Questions About Me

How did you get started playing music for seniors? My father in law had dementia and was no longer able to carry on a conversation with us. He was a Church of the Brethren Minister and music had always been a huge part of his life. He loved the old southern gospel songs. I would take my guitar and sing with him and to my amazement he was able to sing every word and in perfect harmony. I had always played a lot of music, especially with young children. I decided then and there that my perfect job would be to play music with young children and seniors. A few years later life handed me a challenge and I took it as an opportunity to start the Young at Heart Music program. I now spend most of my time singing with seniors.

What makes you different than others who entertain seniors? I think the primary difference in what I do has to do with the training I have had with [Teepa Snow](#), who is a nationally recognized dementia care specialist. I had the music skills and the relationship building skills I needed. But learning from Teepa has made a huge difference in my ability to engage, interact and communicate through music with people with Alzheimer's or dementia. I highly recommend her. She offers so much practical support for caregivers.

How does your background in education and early childhood come into play? Elders should NOT be treated like children. However there are certain skills you learn when you spend time with young children that are very valuable when you spend time with people with dementia. I'm a good observer and I understand that behavior is a form of communication. I know how to follow the lead of the people I am singing with. Pacing and transitions are important and there's an art to respectful distraction and redirecting. Some of this is intuitive and it's just who I am. But a lot of these skills I learned from 4 year olds. Like how to have fun!

What's your music background? I grew up in Iowa in a family that loved to sing and to dance. My dad recalls going to 28 dances in 30 days back when the swing bands were touring the rural routes. My mom played piano and taught me to sing at home and in the church choir. I grew up with the songs that the seniors know and love. My mom bought me my first guitar with green stamps when I was 12 years old. I am a certified music teacher but most of my music experience has been in bands, not in the classroom. I have a lot of experience entertaining people and of course that helps. But when I sing with seniors it's more about engaging them in the experience.

What is your service area? I have clients that I sing with weekly and bi-weekly and monthly here in Northern Michigan. I do try to keep my schedule open to allow for trips further afield. With some advance notice I am willing and able and happy to travel.

Frequently Asked Questions About What I do

Why does music improve the quality of life? The answer is complicated and it's simple. The complicated part has to do with what is happening in the brain, which science suggests is literally hard wired to connect music with memories. The songs of our youth are stored away in our brain, in their own special place. And no matter what happens, hearing those songs can allow us to access memories and feelings.

The simple part has to do with the ability of music to affect how we feel. Have you ever heard a song on the radio that lifted your spirits or reminded you of someone or of something you experienced? If so, then you understand.

Singing and music can make people happy. And happiness improves the quality of everyone's lives.

How do you know what music people will like and what songs to sing? The songs from one's childhood and youth are typically the best for reaching someone with Alzheimer's or dementia. We all have emotional memories tied to music. Talking to family members can help you learn what someone's favorites may be. Some folks are country music fans, others love show tunes. Everyone loves "You Are My Sunshine". The CD I made "Songs You Know By Heart" features 18 favorites. It's a good place to start. I also published a small book called "Finding Memories through Music – A Family Interview". It can serve as a guide to finding the right songs.

I play music in the background all day. Isn't that enough? No! It's not wrong to play music in the background sometimes but the real opportunity is to use music to connect. A music session should be about participation and engagement.

Does there come a time when it's "too late" for music to reach someone? I would say "No". I have experienced amazing moments of awakening from people who otherwise showed no emotion or response. Sometimes it is as slight as one or two fingers keeping time to the music or a loving look. [Teepa Snow](#), dementia care specialist, describes people in the last stage of dementia as "Pearls". Like a pearl they may open "their shell" for a brief time to respond or interact. That moment may be all you get. And those moments are priceless.