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MICHIGAN MUSICIAN HELPS PEOPLE LIVING WITH ALZHEIMER'S AND THEIR FAMILIES REGAIN CONNECTIONS

November is National Alzheimer's Disease Awareness Month

Every 67 seconds someone in the United States develops Alzheimer's. It is the sixth leading cause of death in the United States.ⁱ

In 2014, friends and family of people with Alzheimer's and other dementias provided an estimated 17.9 billion hours of unpaid care, a contribution to the nation valued at \$217.7 billion. This is approximately 46 percent of the net value of Walmart sales in 2013 and nearly eight times the total revenue of McDonald's in 2013.ⁱⁱ

Alzheimer's takes a devastating toll on caregivers. Nearly 60 percent of Alzheimer's and dementia caregivers rate the emotional stress of caregiving as high or very high; about 40 percent suffer from depression.ⁱⁱⁱ

For those living with Alzheimer's and other dementia-related diseases and for their caregivers, communicating and interacting with one another is often a source of frustration and sadness. Traverse City, Michigan, musician and educator Mary Sue Wilkinson is using music to change that.

Music has always been a part of Wilkinson's life. She grew up in a music-loving family and earned her Master's Degree in Early Childhood Education. But her interest in playing music with elders began when she saw the power of music while caring for her father-in-law. Unable to carry on a conversation due to his dementia, he was able to join in and sing all the words in perfect harmony when she played the old songs he knew and loved.

It was a moment that inspired Wilkinson to provide others with that same experience.

Since 2013, Wilkinson has owned and operated Singing Heart to Heart and the Young at Heart Music programs, providing music experiences for seniors, including hundreds of Senior Sing-a-longs. Wilkinson also conducts Music Visits that provide a personalized music experience for people living with memory loss. The sing-a-longs and visits offer a way for family members and caregivers to engage in a meaningful activity.

"Music and singing often bring about an awakening of sorts. It can help people find their way back to memories, to communication, to connection, and to happiness," says Wilkinson.

Savannah Buist, who is part of the award-winning indie-folk trio The Accidentals, understands the impact that Alzheimer's can have on family members and loved ones. Her grandfather, who had Alzheimer's at the end of his life, was Wilkinson's first client.

“It was amazing to witness the power of Mary Sue's music at work. Even when simple tasks became incredibly difficult for him, Mary Sue was always able to get him singing and it gave our family a way to connect with him.”

Not long after launching her business, Wilkinson realized that time and geography were limiting.

“There were only so many hours in a day that I could sing with people,” said Wilkinson.

She recorded and produced her CD *Songs You Know By Heart* because she felt compelled to provide family members and caregivers with a tool that would allow them to use music without her having to be present. The CD is available for purchase or download on her website at <http://www.youngatheartmusic.com/songs-you-know-by-heart>.

In 2016, Wilkinson will publish her first book, *Songs You Know By Heart: A Simple Guide for Using Music in Dementia Care* (which will include her CD). Teepa Snow, one of America's leading educators on dementia, contributed to and endorses the book.

“The power and gift of music and rhythm [is] one of the greatest,” said Snow. “Using [this book] can truly offer ways to sustain or regain connections that we thought were lost or impossible.”

The use of music in dementia care has received growing attention over the last several years. The story of Glen Campbell's Alzheimer's disease experience and the release of the documentary *Alive Inside*, which showcased music's ability to reach people with memory loss, both contributed to that awareness.

Snow is pleased that the use of music in dementia care is gaining attention but stresses that there is still a need.

"I love that more attention, awareness, and knowledge is being brought to bear on this generally retained skill, but I find that there is still an absence of skill in applying what we know into daily habits and routines that make the most of what is possible without overstressing the care provision system or misusing this gift and blessing."

Wilkinson's book will help fill that need, aiding family members and caregivers in creating music experiences with their loved ones and patients that create meaningful connections and positive experiences.

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ⁱ 2015 Alzheimer's Disease Fact and Figures from the Alzheimer's Association
http://www.alz.org/facts/downloads/ff_infographic_2015.pdf

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