



photography credit



Clockwise from left Marie Sewell (resident, Hammond Care) sings next to Kirstin Robertson-Gillam, the first registered full-time music therapist in NSW, who runs therapy classes at the aged-care facility; a group of dementia and non-dementia Hammond residents sing carols at choir practice; residents Florence Comford, Olive Hogan and Marion Broome.

Songs to remember

The healing power of music has been known for aeons but only recently have aged-care facilities discovered its ability to provide relief for those who have Alzheimer's disease. By Claire Scobie.

As a teenager, watching my grandfather disappear into the fog of Alzheimer's disease was difficult. For my grandmother, his wife of more than 50 years, it was devastating. For Magdalene Vizjak, her own sadness "has become overwhelming". Three years ago, her husband, Otto, a strong, bullish man, was admitted to Hammond Care, a residential aged-care facility in western Sydney. Once a brilliant maths and economics teacher, Otto can no longer hold a conversation.

"Strange things started to happen," says 70-year-old Magda in a thick Croatian accent. "He was losing his keys, sometimes his wallet. There was an electricity mess-up and nearly a fire in the bathroom. Then he had his [driver's] licence taken away; that was the end." After doing some tests, his doctor concluded that Otto, now 74, had suffered multiple strokes.

Otto may have advanced dementia but he can still sing. Every week he joins a score of other Hammond Care residents for choir practice led by music therapist Kirstin Robertson-Gillam. "Otto has a very good voice," says Robertson-Gillam. "He can get really angry so singing helps him settle down."

Since 1975, when Associate Professor Dr Denise Grocke and Dr Ruth Bright founded the Australian Music Therapy Association in Sydney, music therapy

has been used in children's hospitals, special schools and nursing homes to encourage laughter, treat anxiety and bring temporary relief from pain. As it becomes increasingly popular in Britain, America and Australia – where it is taught at postgraduate level – evidence suggests it can help the growing number of people with dementia.

According to Alzheimer's Australia, about 210,000 Australians have dementia, a debilitating condition characterised by the loss of memory and cognitive powers. As more people live longer, this figure is projected to increase to more than 730,000 by 2050. Four years ago, the total cost of dementia in Australia was estimated at \$5.6 billion. By mid-century, this is expected to rise to more than 3 per cent of the gross domestic product. But the emotional cost for the sufferers, their families and carers is also high.

"You cry all the time. You share a life with someone and you are grieving for that person," says Magda. The hardest part, she adds, is that Otto's friends can't face seeing him. "People think he's crazy."

Having visited several grim, workhouse-like institutions in the past, I can't allay the apprehension when the *Sunday Life* photographer and I pull up at Hammond Village, home to 280 residents in hostels and a palliative care nursing home. Inside, though, is a pleasant surprise. Specifically geared to those with dementia, Hammond Care has a homely atmosphere with lounge areas and a village cafe.

Walking frames stand in a neat row along the corridor. Inside the chapel, their owners are seated in front of a piano. The audience arrive in wheelchairs, one in a day bed. Robertson-Gillam frantically tries →



Clockwise from right Dolls and other objects are often used as transitional objects to stimulate conversation between residents; Muriel Steele (far left), music therapy student Elina Bellinato, resident Florence Comford and Kirstin Robertson-Gillam; Hammond Care resident Otto Vizjak is visited by his wife Magda, who regularly visits her husband of more than 50 years.



to settle everyone down. No easy task when two-thirds of the choir have dementia. An elderly lady begins to wander off but before she can, Robertson-Gillam vigorously starts to conduct. After the first few bars, the room calms.

Music has always been a passion for Robertson-Gillam, 59. In 1980, after training as a nurse and midwife and starting a family, she took a distance education course in music therapy through the University of Melbourne while majoring in psychology and ethnomusicology at the University of New England in NSW. Seven years later, Robertson-Gillam became the first registered full-time music therapist in the NSW public service. For more than a decade, she has worked with people with dementia and has explored musical healing traditions across the world.

While there are many approaches to music therapy, from helping a patient write songs to vocalising – reflecting sound back to a person to help express their emotions – it is about “looking at the whole person, regardless of their disease,” she says. “Each person has a musical centre, a musical spiritual self and that must be brought out.”

It was while working at Bodington Aged Care Service in NSW’s Blue Mountains that Robertson-Gillam founded her first choir, known as the Blue Jays. “Choir engages people in a very real way.” Members have to learn songs and they have to perform.

Since joining Hammond Care in July 2005, Robertson-Gillam has undertaken a six-month research project to see how the choir helps members. While it shows a trend in decreasing depression – which affects an estimated 20 to 30 per cent of Alzheimer’s patients – the results are not conclusive.

“We know something good is happening but we can’t prove it because it was a pilot study with small numbers,” says Richard Fleming, director of the Dementia Services Development Centre at Hammond Care. “It did not reach the statistical significance we’re looking for.”

And this is part of the problem. “The evidence that shows music therapy is beneficial is largely anecdotal,” says Dr Bruce Barber from Melbourne’s National Ageing Research Institute (NARI). “If music overcomes some of the symptoms associated with dementia, the evidence at this stage suggests it is temporary.”

As music therapy is highly labour-intensive, it remains a luxury. While only about 60 nursing homes across NSW and Victoria have a full-time music therapist, “many more will offer weekly sessions by music therapists,” says Denise Grocke, head of music therapy and director of the National Music Therapy Research Unit at the University of Melbourne. Half of all music therapists are employed in aged care.

Ruth Bright is 77 but she still works once a week in the nursing home of Northaven Retirement Village in Sydney’s Turrumurra. “One man I worked with was a survivor of a German concentration camp who would get frightened around 1pm when he heard the sound of the trolley going through the corridors,” she says. “Music helped to take away his anxiety.”

Music therapy also helps relatives, says Bright. “It opens a window for just a few moments and they see the person they once knew. That can be sad because they realise how much they’ve changed but it’s also reassuring that the person is still there.”

When someone is extremely distressed, or distressing or even violent to others, the options



available to a cash-strapped, understaffed care home are limited: restraint, medication or sedation. The drugs used to manage dementia can be debilitating, with side effects such as nausea and nightmares. “Research in the US and Australia shows that music therapy may reduce the need for medications to control agitation,” says Grocke.

“Our research indicates that people with mild to moderate dementia are still processing music in a normal way,” says Barber from NARI. “The data also support the notion that the capacity to process music remains after the capacity for language has become impaired.” He remains cautious, however, pointing out that when someone is simply “kind and engaging, it can make a difference.”

Nevertheless, watching the Hammond Care choir at full pitch, there’s a remarkable transformation. When the first strains of an Irving Berlin song begin, the atmosphere thickens. I notice the photographer is quietly weeping. From the look of those singing, they are transported to happier times. There is something unbearably poignant about this: a sense of community, of shared experience, is seamlessly created.

At the end, Robertson-Gillam looks tired. She works hard to make each person feel special. “I have a feel for old people; I love them,” she says, a little out of breath. “It could be my grandmother sitting there. It could be me one day.” ●

People with mild to moderate dementia can still process music in a normal way.