

FGCU BENEFITS FROM \$1 MILLION PLEDGE

SWFL Children's Charities, Inc., helps start a music therapy program. By Robin DeMattia

Whether it's a 2-year-old frightened by a nurse with a needle or an unmotivated senior who needs physical therapy to regain strength and leave the hospital, music therapy can soothe worries, reduce pain and encourage active participation in a patient's health care, often speeding his or her recovery.

Music therapy is a growing field, and the Southwest Florida community will soon benefit from more certified music therapists in the area. In fall 2015, Florida Gulf Coast University's Bower School of Music & the Arts plans to enroll its first 15 to 20 students who will pursue bachelor's degrees in music therapy.

Startup costs for the new academic program were made possible by a \$1 million endowment pledge from SWFL Children's Charities, Inc., which has donated \$200,000 annually for the past three years. The final payment is expected in spring 2016, with money generated during upcoming Wine Fests helping.

"All across the country, there is great state-of-the-art music therapy taking place," says Michael Rohrbacher, who has a doctorate degree in music therapy, and is board-certified and serves as an associate professor of music at the school. "To have the resources available to us as our program begins will help us accelerate to best practices very quickly."

Throughout the four-year course of study, FGCU's music therapy students will strengthen their musical



skills, study music history, develop their singing voices in social and interactive ways, expand their repertoire to include songs that will appeal to people ranging from toddlers to seniors, and learn to play portable instruments such as electric pianos, guitar and percussion devices. They will also study psychology, abnormal psychology, special education, anatomy and physiology. Some courses are meant to help when working with patients who have disabilities. Students will also spend time providing music therapy services in the community and participating in internships.

Once they graduate and are board-certified, the students will be prepared to work in a variety of health care settings and with a range of patients, helping improve health care outcomes and reduce expenses.

"It's well-documented that music impacts our motor functions, emotions, socialization and cognition," Rohrbacher says. "When we listen to music, there can be com-



pensation in areas of the brain that are struggling.”

For example, he says, a person with dementia may have impaired thinking and memory yet strong auditory senses. A child with autism who rocks may react to music and slow down his or her physical movement when slower music is played. Making these types of connections can help with other medical goals.

Already in Southwest Florida, music therapy is making a difference.

“We’re able to bring familiar sounds during an unfamiliar time,” says Julie Avirett, one of two board-certified music therapists at Golisano Children’s Hospital of Southwest Florida, which began offering music therapy in 2007. “Music helps people relax, reduce their fear, reduce pain and focus on music instead of what is happening to them. It improves respiration, lowers blood pressure and heart rate, reduces the amount of sedation needed for procedures, and motivates compliance and

participation in care.”

With children, siblings often need encouragement to visit a loved one in the hospital. And nervous parents are helped when their children are put at ease. Avirett brings harmonicas, toy drums, music wands and other instruments that patients can use to vent their feelings, reduce anxiety, extend their range of motion and increase respiration.

She emphasizes that live music has stronger benefits than recorded music, which often has too fast a beat for therapeutic purposes. “Live music can be adjusted to what’s occurring now. And I can also give people verbal cues, like to move their hand forward now.”

Rohrbacher is enthusiastic about FGCU adding to the crop of approximately 250 credentialed music therapists in the state of Florida. “We project being able to address community needs and that our graduates will parallel job development in this area,” he explains.

SINGING FOR HEALTH

A young patient is entertained by a music therapist at Lee Memorial Health System. Funds from the Southwest Florida Wine & Food Fest are helping to establish a music therapy program at Florida Gulf Coast University.