

Leah Drew

Professor Kole Matheson

ENGL 211C

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Service Through Music

Service-learning has been shown repeatedly to be a valuable way of learning skills and becoming involved with the community. Students who participate in service-learning gain self-confidence and leadership skills. They become more responsible and motivated to work with other people to accomplish goals. Most importantly, service-learning teaches students the importance of being a good citizen, becoming socially aware, and being involved politically. It builds on our abilities to empathize with others and think about issues that don't necessarily affect us.

In the weeks leading up to my delivery of service, I integrated several new piano pieces into my daily practice sessions. I specifically chose songs that were calm, easy to listen to, and appealing to a wide audience and found classical and folk pieces to be the best fit. Because my original plan was to volunteer at Signature HealthCARE in Norfolk, I leaned more toward classical, and included two nocturnes by Chopin, Moonlight Sonata, one of my own compositions, and a classically inspired song from the Kingdom Hearts soundtrack titled "Dearly Beloved." I also planned to do some improvisation and play some folk songs by ear.

Signature couldn't get me scheduled before my deadline, so I ended up contacting a nursing home I had volunteered at as a kid and young teen. I delivered my service at Our Lady of Perpetual Help on November 16th from 1:30 to 3:45 PM, two days after I contacted them. Unlike Signature, Our Lady is a Christian nursing home, so I decided to modify my program and pulled

some sheet music from the internet that they would recognize. For this purpose, I chose Amazing Grace and Morning Has Broken, which were arranged by MuseScore users BreezePiano and Martínez José-Daniel respectively.

I was a bit nervous going in, since I felt like I was under-prepared. I ended up mainly working alongside D. Joyce Evans, one of the activities coordinators, who showed me the three different wings I'd be playing at. Each one of them had a piano that seemed as if it hadn't been touched or maintained in years. Most of the lower notes were out of tune, some didn't sound unless they were slammed down, and the keys on one of the pianos were coated in sticky yellow residue; this forced me to adapt my style to get around these limitations. As I started playing, some of the residents came closer to watch, and one commented on how nice it was to have live music.

At that point, I realized how lonely some of them must be. That wasn't something I had given too much thought as a kid. I'm sure plenty of them had visitors, but that didn't make them any less locked inside. They weren't able to choose to go see a concert or take a walk in the park. They were hardly even allowed outdoors; since the majority of the patients had dementia, their limited access to the rest of the world was encircled by a tall metal fence. It's hard to imagine being deprived of your autonomy like that.

In many ways, this experience was different than when I used to volunteer as a child. When I was a kid, part of the performance was simply being nine years old and playing a piano; the residents fawned over me and were entertained just by me being there. As an adult, I could do more. I felt like I could connect with them on a level that I couldn't before.

In between pieces, I talked at length with one of the residents, who I will call "May." May was hard of hearing, talked very quietly, and wore a red shawl over her shoulders. She told

me that she used to be a nun and a teacher, and talked about missing family and friends from before she was institutionalized. We talked for a good ten minutes, and I felt like by the end of our conversation we had gotten to know each other well. I got to know her as an individual, not as a patient.

Sadly, I wasn't allowed to capture my favorite part of this experience on video. Another volunteer had noticed that I had pulled out the sheet music to Amazing Grace and asked if she could lead a chorus with the residents. Since I was sight-reading the piece, I was nervous that I would mess up and throw off the rhythm, but I pushed down my fear and told her to go ahead.

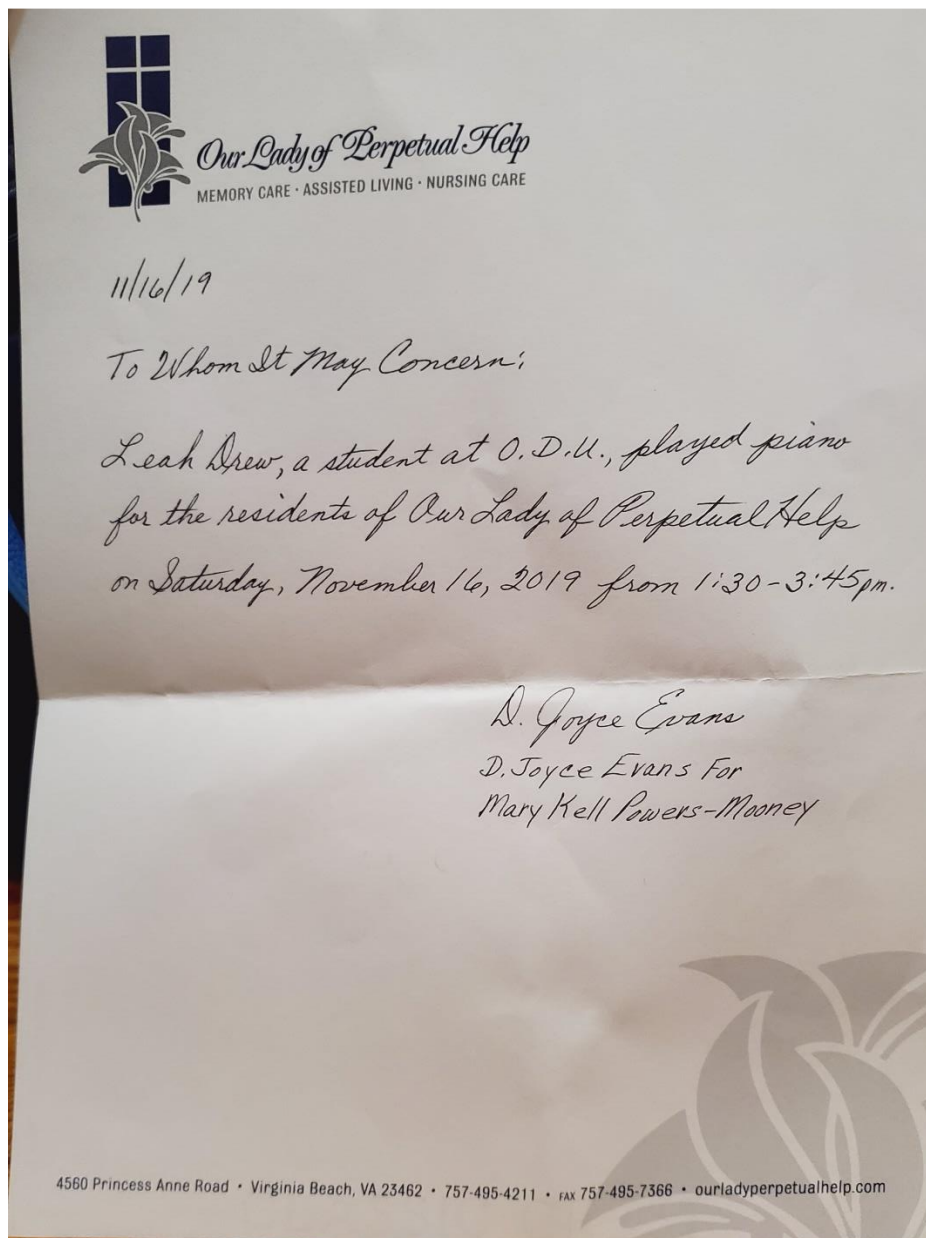
I wish I could articulate how the music swelled, spilling out of the room and into the hallway, as ten or fifteen voices rose up to sing what was second nature to them. The melody had the same off-key charm as "happy birthday" does at a party, but the amount of joy and hope in their voices made it feel like so much more. It reminded me of what I already knew: music heals.

As someone who has been involved in advocacy for people with disabilities, this was an important experience for me. The elderly are often overlooked when it comes to human rights and freedom. The divide between our generations is so deep that many younger people ignore the elderly or stereotype them as a primarily bigoted generation, which leads to them getting left out of discussions of ableism, racism, and other forms of prejudice. What's more, many people have trouble seeing those that don't have a personal influence on their lives as real. People who are institutionalized are kept so far away from society that most citizens don't think about the issues they face unless they have a family or friend living in an institution—or, if they do, they don't think of them as people in anything more than hypotheticals.

The biggest takeaway for me is that every member of the older generation has lived a life as vibrant as the rest of ours. It's important to include them in our activism and treat them as

individuals. “Baby boomer” is not a political party, or even a class of people; they’re as diverse as every other generation, and their autonomy needs to be respected. Moving forward, I’d like to start volunteering at Our Lady again, and possibly get scheduled in the next few weeks at Signature so I can also see a non-Christian perspective. I’ve learned that it’s important for me to start including the elderly in my advocacy, because they are just as affected by prejudice as the rest of us. While I don’t think I have the full picture yet, I think the best way of getting to that point is by doing some deeper research and getting involved further. Intersectionality is important.

Appendix



This proof of service note was written by D. Joyce Evans, who works under Mary Kell Powers-Mooney, Director of Life Enrichment.