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SINGING THROUGH CHANGE:

A Community Engagement Project for Women in Recovery
Performing with the Purdue Fort Wayne Choral Union Choir

Madison Boyden (*Music Therapy*)

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Madison Boyden is a senior Music Therapy major at Purdue University Fort Wayne (PFW). For the past three years she has acquired valuable music therapy clinical experience working with a variety of clientele in several different settings. Her future career aspirations include providing music therapy services in mental health and rehabilitation settings, as well as advocating for music therapy in the Fort Wayne area. This article describes her current project of providing a transitional bridge to social engagement for four women currently in treatment at the YWCA of Northeast Indiana's addiction residential treatment program. Supported by the Purdue University Office of Engagement's Community Service/Service-Learning Grant Program, these women participated in the PFW School of Music Choral Union choir with the objective of expanding their opportunity for community reintegration through a healthy, confidence-building leisure experience.

INTRODUCTION

Hope & Harriet is an intensive residential treatment program in a subacute medical facility for women 18 years and older that specializes in the pursuit of recovery from chemical dependency. PFW music therapy students have been given the unique opportunity to work with the women as part of their music therapy clinical practicum experiences. My final music therapy practicum, in partial fulfillment of my bachelor's degree in music therapy, began my path forward into this project.

Board-certified music therapists working in residential treatment facilities hold group and individual sessions using music experiences and the relationships developed through them to meet the women's needs and to address their individualized goals. Music experiences are used to decrease anxiety, promote relaxation, increase emotional expression, and learn effective coping skills, social skills, and group cohesiveness. In this setting, music

therapy is often part of a collaborative treatment team made up of multiple therapies and social work. The women are provided the assistance they need to make changes in themselves (intrapersonal) and in relationships with others (interpersonal). Community social integration is primarily focused on attending 12-step programs, work and job support opportunities, and legal and health care services. Social leisure engagement opportunities are offered less frequently.

Music therapy can be ecological, as well as intrapersonal and or interpersonal (Bruscia, 2014). Ecological changes are changes that are a result of music experience within the client's community environment. Community music therapy is a specific clinical approach in which clients are assisted in assimilating into a community environment, which may lead to a sense of belonging and social acceptance. It may also provide opportunities to address issues that typically impede clients from being successful in the community.

This advanced practicum project focuses on assisting the integration of the women in the YWCA residential recovery program back into the local community by creating the supports needed for them to successfully participate in the Purdue Fort Wayne Choral Union choir. Through this experience they are learning and applying various skill sets and coping strategies for successful integration, while supporting their current treatment.

DESCRIPTION OF SITE

The YWCA, founded in 1858, is an organization spanning 122 countries with 25 million members. The purpose of the YWCA of Northeast Indiana is to improve quality of life, provide support for women and their families, and build healthy communities. They strive to hold true to their mission of “eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all” (YWCA Northeast Indiana, n.d.). This organization provides services focusing on addiction recovery, domestic violence, and sexual assault.

Using a holistic approach addressing mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional well-being, women in the

program are provided with services such as individual case management, parental coaching, skills groups, personal counseling, daily meditation and mindfulness, yoga and exercise, and nutritional coaching. In 2018, the PFW Music Therapy program established a clinical practicum affiliation with the YWCA programs. Through this affiliation, music therapy students are supervised under faculty member Dr. Eileen Garwood, clinical instructor of music therapy, and given the opportunity to gain the experience and skills needed to provide music therapy in this type of setting.

THE PROJECT

This project was inspired by Dr. Garwood who, while attending a choral concert at PFW, envisioned a community integration opportunity. Due to the relationships Dr. Garwood established with the women in the YWCA program, she understood many of them had very positive early life experiences in music through their elementary and high school education. She wondered what reintroducing the women to a community music experience might mean to their recovery process and reintegration into community life.

Figure 1. Harriet House is a YWCA residential treatment facility serving women in recovery and their children. Our weekly choir practice sessions, as well as music therapy sessions, were held in the basement of the facility. Photo taken by author Madison Boyden.

With the support and guidance of Dr. William Sauerland, assistant professor of music and director of choral studies, the women were given the opportunity to participate in and perform with the PFW Choral Union Choir. This is a nonauditioned choir that meets once a week, and it is made up of both PFW students and members from the Fort Wayne community and surrounding areas. It encompasses singers of all levels, with some being involved in a choir for the first time and others being highly skilled.

In the fall 2019 semester, Dr. Garwood and I acquired a Purdue Service-Learning grant, which marked the kickstart of this project. The main objective for the financial support was to provide as many resources as possible to eliminate obstacles that would hinder the women's participation, such as childcare, transportation, rehearsal materials, and concert attire. Because chemical addiction adversely affects psychological health as well as physical, traits such as impulsivity, lack of commitment, denial, and low self-esteem were some of the obstacles that would beset the participants during their participation. Providing some of the women's basic needs allowed them to focus, set goals, plan, and be accountable without extraneous worries. These are also some of the positive qualities they may strive to achieve in order to make their involvement in choral union (as well as recovery) a success. We arranged a meeting with the CEO of the YWCA of Northeast Indiana, Paula Hughes-Schuh, and their acting director of addictions treatment, Valerie Panning, to propose the project. With their full support, logistics for transportation and childcare were arranged and participation in choral union could begin.

Figure 2. Faculty mentor Dr. Garwood and I after successfully completing a major milestone in our community engagement project.

Figure 3. Here, the women involved are feeling accomplished after completing their final dress rehearsal for the concert entitled "If It Ain't Baroque."

At the start of the spring 2019 semester, four women committed to participate in this new experience. One of the women worked actively to make changes to her work schedule in order to participate. All four of the women, despite our initial nervousness that they would not follow through with their commitment, arrived full of eager anticipation and some mild trepidation. I was there to welcome them at the John and Ruth Rhinehart Music Center, answer questions, give a tour, and allay any fears before their first rehearsal. I also supported the women by meeting with them once a week at Harriet House to teach and reinforce their vocal parts and talk about their rehearsal experiences. In practice sessions, online midi tracks were used to review and learn vocal lines while allowing the women to understand how their parts fit in with the ensemble. Because we were learning Latin and German repertoire, I also spent time teaching the women the pronunciations of the text of each movement, as well as note values, pitches, and correct rhythms.

The choral works we rehearsed and performed were from the Baroque period (1600–1750) and included beautiful works such as Vivaldi's *Magnificat* and *Komm Susser Tod*, composed by J. S. Bach. The actual concert, entitled "If It Ain't Baroque," also included works performed by the PFW University Singers and Treble Chorus. This meant the women were additionally a part of a larger combined choir. They were fully immersed with all students, faculty, and community members in the PFW choral program.

As a part of our choir practice sessions each week, I set aside time to talk with the women about their

Figure 4. Members of the PFW Choral Union choir, as well as the University Singers and Treble chorus, perform in collaboration with a small orchestral ensemble of faculty members, led by Dr. William Sauerland.

experiences, allowing them to express thoughts about the week's rehearsal, any challenges or triumphs they may have had, as well as feelings about their experience overall. This was an important time when the women could share and feel supported and validated. As time progressed, I began to give the women notecards to write down personal statements regarding their choral involvement, inquiring about their struggles, successes, and interactions within the community environment. This allowed me to see trends in thoughts and experiences from the first rehearsal to final performance, giving insight into the depth of the women's involvement and measurable growth. We also had the opportunity to process how this experience tied in with their life experiences, discussing past memories, as well as what impact their involvement in choir might have in their future in terms of providing an opportunity to build a new social network, acquire a new leisure skill, and form a positive, healthy coping skill.

Acquiring concert dress was another important component of this project and was financially supported by the grant. The women expressed excitement and a sense of freedom as they do not get the opportunity to go shopping due to financial constraints as well as being in the residential treatment program. For some this was the first time that they had owned any type of formal wear. One of them expressed that she had not "worn anything like this since my wedding day." We also obtained

Figure 5. Shown here are some of the women's comments about their choral experience. (From left to right) "This has been a great experience. It has helped build my self-esteem—positive uplifting. I feel like I am part of something uplifting. I almost quit at first, but I am so glad I stuck it out, because I love it." "I got way out of my shell! It was lots of fun and helped with my outside mental issues, thank you!" "This experience has brought me back to my childhood and how I engulfed myself into choir and show choir to escape the pain of the abuse I was put through. It's a very humbling experience." "It's good, stress free, like I can be myself." "This has been a very positive, uplifting experience. It has made me feel important and a part of something positive. It is helping me with my self-esteem." "Learning how to have a voice again, and it's fun in my recovery."

complimentary tickets for family members and YWCA staff to attend the performance. The women were delighted to have the chance to share this experience with people who meant a lot to them.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

At the first rehearsal, everyone was shocked to learn that the concert material was entirely in German and Latin. Not only was this the first community choral experience for the women, but they would be singing in a foreign language. Having minimal experience reading music, the women also struggled with following along throughout the rehearsal, asking me multiple times where we were, what we were doing, and how to pronounce words. Other times they would sit back and listen, realizing that they did not yet have the ability to understand the music and rehearsal process. They expressed things like, “I am just so confused”; “I don’t think I will be able to do this”; “I can’t read music”; “I am not a good singer.” What I found significant throughout this first rehearsal was the way the women supported and encouraged each other. Even though they were in a very difficult and overwhelming first experience, they would often ask each other, “Are you doing OK?” and “How is it going?” This allowed them to feel connected in all the uncertainty. At the end of the rehearsal, the women expressed that the experience was very challenging for them, and that they were frustrated and struggling at times because of the different factors that came into play with the rehearsal process. I was apprehensive about their ability to handle the experience. Would they ever come back for future rehearsals?

Two days later, we were to have our first practice session outside of choir rehearsal. It had been my experience that commitment and attendance was not something to count on with these women. Although their days are highly structured, many extraneous variables often impact follow-through. I was prepared for them to back out after being so overwhelmed with the first rehearsal; however, their attendance at our first practice session reassured me of the extent of their dedication. This moment was perhaps one of the most rewarding clinical experiences of my undergraduate career. I have never seen anyone so excited and committed to learn how to sing in a foreign language before! But would this newfound joy fade before the next rehearsal? Driving to the second rehearsal, I was adjusting my expectations and thinking if maybe just half showed up, it would be good news.

To my surprise, the women somehow doubled in number. Not only did they come back, but they encouraged

two others to join. During this rehearsal, Dr. Sauerland announced that there were some solo opportunities in the work and that he would be holding auditions. To my amazement, one of the women wanted to audition and expressed that she was participating in the choir to get outside of her comfort zone. She realized auditioning for a solo would promote even more personal growth. I was proud of her for taking that opportunity to make the most of her experience, and was at ease knowing that, no matter what happened in the audition, Dr. Sauerland would provide supportive encouragement for her. After auditioning, she was full of joy and expressed confidence.

Throughout the next few weeks the women were consistent in coming to rehearsals, confirming times and arranging the rides needed to get to Rhinehart. As time went on, I watched them fully integrate into this new experience, interacting and talking with community choir members, even assisting them during rehearsals, showing them where we were in the music, and answering their questions. In the week leading up to the concert, the women were excited to finally be able to present what they had been working on in rehearsals and practice sessions. We had one joint rehearsal with the other choirs involved and a last dress rehearsal, which was initially overwhelming for the women as they realized how many people might attend the concert.

Choral Union performed in the first half of the concert and were able to sit in the audience after performing our set. Immediately after leaving the stage, one of the women patted me on the back and said, “That was great!” The women had invited family members, but not all were certain they would actually attend. One of the women in particular hadn’t seen her family in about two years. While on stage, the women noticed that some of their family members and staff were sitting in the audience. Their support held great meaning for the women and had a profound impact. I felt privileged to see and be a part of that reunification.

Because the concert was a thoroughly satisfying experience for all, we were looking forward to our next rehearsal and second concert performance to take place after spring break. Unfortunately, we had just experienced our last concert of the semester. All university student activities were suspended due to COVID-19, and we all retreated to self-isolation following the guidelines set by the federal government.

In reflecting on the overall experience, I was able to realize just how much it impacted the women’s lives in such a short time frame. They felt a sense of belonging within

Figure 6. Dr. Sauerland welcoming the audience to the concert, with performers getting ready to share what they have been working on.

the choir, and they were a valued component of the musical process. They shared stories of their exhilarating car rides back to Harriet House after rehearsals when they “had the music turned up and were singing.” One of the women expressed, “It made me feel like I felt before addiction” and, “I am learning to find my voice again.” Multiple times, the women would communicate how the

experience was “positive and uplifting,” and how they felt that being in the PFW Choral Union choir would be something that they would be interested in pursuing even after the completion of their recovery program. Forming new relationships through a novel and fulfilling leisure skill may be a first step in their ability to live meaningful healthier and fuller lives.

STUDENT AUTHOR IMPACT

I learned so much throughout this experience, some things about which I did not even think prior to the start of the project. At times, the women were nervous, or even anxious before or during rehearsals, in part due to the new social integration, but also because of past traumatic experiences. In this respect I became more cognizant of the fact that, even if something is intended to be a positive experience, it could be a negative trigger for some. I became more aware of the physiological traumatic responses of others and how to deescalate and acknowledge those safely, without retraumatization.

I also came to realize the importance of the clinical relationship between the client and the therapist, especially because it was integral to the success of this community music therapy project. Prior to this experience, I don’t believe that I truly felt the impact of the therapeutic relationship within the music therapy process. The women were very open in sharing their thoughts and feelings

Figure 7. The women and myself, excitedly awaiting our concert call time in the lobby of the Rhinehart Music Center.

Figure 8. Pictured here are the women with faculty mentor Dr. Garwood and me after a successful first concert experience.

about the experience, which would not have been the case if we did not have such a strong relationship.

I have experienced significant professional and personal growth throughout the course of this project. Through working with the YWCA, I was able to network and meet new people. It allowed me to be more assertive in reaching out to community members, and not be afraid to advocate for music therapy. I am more confident in myself and feel gratified that I am actually making a difference in the lives of the women involved. I feel that I was able to build stronger relationships with the staff at Harriet House. I have thoroughly enjoyed all of my experiences working with the YWCA and the women and families they serve, in previous practica and this current experience. I am passionate about working with individuals in addiction recovery and mental health and would like to work in a facility like this as a future professional board-certified music therapist.

CONCLUSION

Residential treatment programs work to address the need for individuals to develop new healthy habits intended to become routine in life, providing the means to heal oneself physically, emotionally, and spiritually and learning skills to live independently. My community engagement project supported the women's treatment beyond the residential setting, facilitating integration of the clients back into a positive community environment to participate in a shared music experience. The women's

continued participation in the PFW Choral Union choir, even after their graduation from the YWCA treatment program, may provide the necessary interactive support, shared common experience, sense of accomplishment, and self-fulfilling joy that can replace the unhealthy and destructive habits that led to the rising drug addiction and overdose crisis. Could this one experience have an impact on the women to maintain sobriety and begin their lives over again? They experienced a boost in self-confidence, increased feelings of accomplishment, stronger relationships, and learned a new leisure skill, all goals of the project.

This experience has provided me with significant personal and professional growth, and it has been extremely impactful. It has been eye-opening, allowing me to grasp a deeper understanding of what music therapy means to me.

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