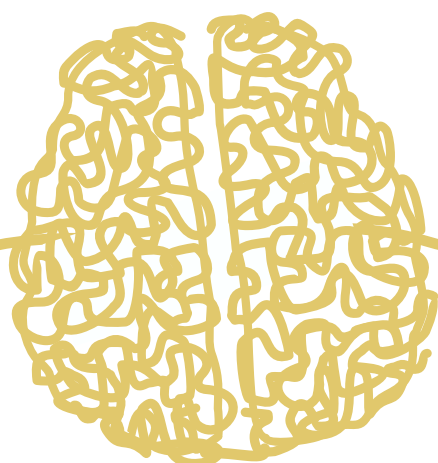




“When you put that music on, you don’t know what’s going on with their heart, mind and soul. Music opens all three. They’re remembering their childhood, they’re remembering sock hops, dances they had to do in high school.

They remember who they are.”

JP MALONEY,
Music Is Our Weapon co-founder



Songs of hope

How a nonprofit is striking a chord against Alzheimer’s

Emma Court | The Dallas Morning News (TNS) ¶ The man dancing and belting out “Blue Suede Shoes” was no Elvis Presley. He didn’t have the drawling musicality or the hip-thrusting dance moves. His blue down jacket, guarding against the room’s air-conditioned chill, was no spangled white jumpsuit. His hair had gone white long ago. ¶ The lyrics were unintelligible, the shuffle stilted, but the performance was riveting. Hours earlier, Philip Caruso, 67, who has dementia, had been sitting silent and still by himself in a corner of the Cedar Hill Healthcare Center rec room. ¶ Behind the transformation: a pair of headphones, the Spotify app, the King himself — and a volunteer from the Dallas music therapy nonprofit group Music Is Our Weapon. ¶ Armed with MP3 players sorted by genre, a rat’s nest of black headphones and a stack of music questionnaires, the volunteers are on a quest: to find the songs that inspire reactions like Caruso’s. **Please see MUSIC, 5D** ILLUSTRATION BY ALIYA MOOD/GANNETT AND THINKSTOCK

Evolving strep may lead to vaccine

Some strains develop aggressive toxins

By Lauran Neergaard
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The same bacteria that cause simple strep throat sometimes trigger bloodstream or even flesh-eating infections instead, and over the years, dangerous cases have increased. Now researchers have uncovered how some strains of this bug evolved to

become more aggressive.

The bacterial sleuthing may offer clues for developing a vaccine against group A streptococcus, and for detecting and fighting outbreaks.

The reason one person recovers easily from strep throat and another gets an invasive infection has lots to do with individual immune systems. But Monday’s re-

search found genetic changes can spur the germ to produce more of two key toxins, becoming more virulent.

“These increased amounts of toxins are like throwing an accelerant onto the fire,” said Dr. James M. Musser of the Houston Methodist Research Institute, who led the project being reported in the Journal of Clinical Investigation.

Group A strep causes 600 million illnesses worldwide a

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Music

Continued from 1D

Over the course of a few visits to the nursing home, based on the answers each resident gives, they'll build playlists of songs. They'll then load those songs onto free MP3 players and give them to each participant.

When someone moves into a nursing home, it's easy for them to become hidden from and invisible to society. Music Is Our Weapon can't change that fact, but volunteers can harness the soulful crooning of Otis Redding and the dulcet tones of Frank Sinatra to tap into a joy that transcends individual circumstances. One that reminds residents of their youth and gets them back on their feet — literally.

At a minimum, co-founders Ashley Brightwell and JP Maloney hope their efforts will leave the people they help — many of whom have Alzheimer's and dementia — soothed and easier for nursing home staff to work with. Music Is Our Weapon, which they founded two years ago, has worked with several nursing homes in the area.

Caruso is their best-case scenario. As were the two other people who, whisked away by the music of their youth, also broke out into song that day.

"When you put that music on, you don't know what's going on with their heart, mind and soul. Music opens all three," Maloney said. "They're remembering their childhood, they're remembering sock hops, dances they had to do in high school.

"They remember who they are."

The power of music initially brought Brightwell, 35, and Maloney, 26, both avid music fans, together to form a music blog. Brightwell, who had seen the way music therapy alleviated his stepfather's severe health problems, suggested adding a charitable component.

Although the blog still exists, Maloney says it's now more of a "complement to a nonprofit." They hope to expand to Austin and Houston this year, and expand beyond senior citizens, too. The goal, Maloney says, is "using the power of music to make people's day

better."

The group's approach is as simple as it is effective.

Residents sat quietly in the Cedar Hill rec room as the Music Is Our Weapon volunteers, many of them in their 20s, streamed in, armed with smartphones and the Spotify or Pandora streaming media apps. They carefully wrote down the tracks the seniors liked.

The residents began requesting music: Aretha Franklin, Gary Busey, Marvin Gaye. Within minutes of putting on the headphones, smiles were sprinkled across the room. There was head-nodding and foot-tapping.

Before Count Basie's "April in Paris" played on his headphones, Willie Webber, 61, who has a cognitive impairment, had been sitting still in his wheelchair. Once the song started, he began laughing. "Yeah," he said, in recognition.

Across the front of Webber's black shirt stretched the word "Rock," a denim Bourbon Street cap was perched atop his head. A strand of red Mardi Gras beads hung around his neck.

"He's ready," Maloney said. "He's ready for a little music."

In one of the room's dark, faded floral armchairs sat Angelina Rod-

riguez, 47, doodling a wide-eyed girl with long eyelashes and a voluminous tumble of curls on lined paper.

Rodriguez has a mental disability. She lived with her mother in Dallas for 33 years. When her mother died a year ago, she moved to Cedar Hill.

While listening to Barbra Streisand, Rodriguez began to open up, chatting up first-time volunteer Sarah Young.

"I got my own radio when I was only 14," Rodriguez, who has square-rimmed glasses and graying brown bangs, said. "Me and my mom first saw her on TV, when she did the concert."

When Streisand's "Woman in Love" came on, Rodriguez broke into warbling song.

"Woman in love," Rodriguez sang, still doodling, a jumble of crayons before her. "And I'd do anything."

"It just makes your heart just burst, doesn't it?" said Marsha Evans, beaming. Evans, the friendly visitor coordinator of the nonprofit organization Senior Source, helped bring Music Is Our Weapon to Cedar Hill and is working to get the group into more nursing homes.

Though used with patients of all ages and backgrounds, music

therapy especially "has an amazing ability to stimulate long-term memories, even if a person has cognitive impairment, with something like Alzheimer's," said Robert Krout, a professor and chair of the music therapy department at Southern Methodist University.

Music memories, stored as long-term and robust memories in the brain, can be triggered by hearing that music again. "Even if the person isn't aware of it, they'll respond," said Krout, especially if there are emotional associations with the music or memory.

That has all kinds of positive implications: It can help make people more cognizant, reality-oriented and active, including getting them to interact with others and have some speech again. Depending on "the per-

son's situation at that time, what music is used and how that music is used," music can also be used for calming purposes. An example is Alzheimer's patients, who are often confused, anxious and even agitated, Krout said.

Does the music make a difference? Victoria Thompson, Cedar Hill's director of activities and admissions, doesn't hesitate.

"Yes, it does. They light up — look at it," she said, gesturing at a chuckling resident. While the seniors sometimes listen to music on their own, she said, some have trouble accessing it. The Music Is Our Weapon volunteers are also new faces, and "some of (the residents) don't have visitors."

Krout cautioned that although it's "great what they're doing," there is a difference between

trained music therapists and the volunteers that Music Is Our Weapon brings in.

Still, music is a "very powerful medium in our lives," he said.

"For a lot of us, we can do our life timeline through music," Krout said. "Music gets passed down generationally. We know the songs our grandparents knew. ...Thirty years later, when you're an adult and hear that music, it brings you back to that time, even if you haven't heard that song since, since it was part of that relationship."

On that recent Saturday, Rodriguez sent Young away from Cedar Hill with some drawings — a gift. "My heart is full," Young said.

"I hope you'll visit us again," Rodriguez said as the volunteers began filing out of the room. "Bring more music."

Music is Our Weapon volunteer Savannah French, left, dances with Philip Caruso as she shares some Elvis songs through headphones at the Cedar Hill Healthcare Center in Cedar Hill, Texas. Volunteers visited the Alzheimer's and dementia patients to reintroduce them to music they grew up with. The music helps soothe them and sometimes brings back memories. TNS

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