

CALENDAR

A list of upcoming events.

C2

COMMUNITY

AG PAGE
Catch up with
Lee Pitts
C5

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Section C

Paso Robles Press

Tuesday, January 13, 2009

Seminar showcases the benefits of music as medicine

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As Devin Wallace belted out a song with enthusiastic acoustic guitar accompaniment on Saturday in the Paso Robles City Library, a passer-by might have assumed that he was giving a small, private concert.

But for the handful of San Luis Obispo County residents who attended the event, that music was an invaluable tool on how to manage, live with and help control Multiple Sclerosis. Wallace is a creative expression specialist and programs manager with the SLO County Office of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. On Saturday, he held a special workshop entitled "Music as Medicine" in a private room connected to the Library.

"Our lives are saturated with music," he said. "It is in every elevator, every grocery store, for better or worse."

Saturday's workshop was a lesson on how those diagnosed with MS could make music work for them.

Music is as old as man himself and boasts as many functions as it has styles. A classical piece can soothe the frayed nerves, just as a grinding beat can make the listener want to dance. Music has the ability alternately sadden or inspire, provoke or relax, invite a flood of nostalgia or emphasize the modern.

Still, no matter what sort of feeling it inspires, it always evokes some sort of reaction in the listener. Recently, music has taken on the role of therapeutic tool, aimed at addressing not only emotional health but also in promoting physical health.

"We all have used music medicinally at some point in our lives, whether we are aware of it or not," Wallace said. "The point of us gathering is just to examine how might we use it in more applications."

As a creative expression specialist, in the past Wallace has harnessed the healing power of music to help stroke survivors. Music therapy, he said, has been particularly effective in promoting the cognitive function, improving

the verbal abilities and in re-building motor functions for those who have suffered from a stroke.

As programs manager of NMSS, Wallace said he hopes to bring the same tools to those in SLO County who are battling MS. A chronic and often disabling disease, MS attacks the central nervous system, made up of the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves, according to the NMSS Web site, www.nationalMSSociety.org. Symptoms of MS vary with each person, but commonly include fatigue, numbness and problems with walking, balance and coordination. More severe symptoms include paralysis and loss of vision.

According to NMSS, although there is no known cure for MS, effective strategies are available to modify the course of the disease, treat flare-ups, manage symptoms, improve function and safety and provide emotional support. Wallace urged those who attended the event — both those diagnosed with MS and MS caretakers — to consider music as one of those tools to help manage the disease.

"I think it behooves us to look in our own medicine bag and think about what we put into our medicine bag and think, 'How can we use music more in that?'" he said.

The best part, Wallace said, was that unlike modern pharmaceuticals, which can be extremely costly, music is free to the listener.

"Any kind of medicine that is free, it is instantly accessible and now through the Internet, through the explosion of world music, through mingling of music, it is even more ever present and more available to us — a wider range of 'medicine' is available to use," he said.

The use of music as a form of medicine is not a new idea. In fact, it is a remarkably old one. Indigenous cultures in the Americas utilized healing songs and chants, and ancient cultures in India, China and Greece all explored the physical affect of different tones of music, Wallace said. Recent medical research seems to

back up the incredible healing power of music.

"Music activates every single neural region that has so far been mapped by cognitive neural scientists," he said.

Wallace pointed to studies that show music can reduce anxiety, depression and stress — all of which come into play for those who are fighting MS — while at the same time boosting natural opiates. Music has been shown to reduce cardiac complication, lower blood pressure and heart rate, boost immune cells, reduce levels of pain and improve cognitive functions of elderly people simply by stimulating blood flow to the brain, he said. All of these functions would be beneficial to those hoping to manage the symptoms of MS.

Paso Robles resident Judy Malinski, leader for a MS support group that meets locally, said music has been a useful tool in getting through large tasks. An avid quilter, Malinski listens to the radio in order to settle into groove when working on her projects.

"During work, I have got that flowing going," she said.

Linda Neville, a Paso Robles resident who also battles MS, noted that music helps her to concentrate and fight fatigue throughout the day.

"I play the radio all day long until news comes on and then I turn it off," she said.

Wallace urged all with MS to consider looking at music as a part of their treatment and to use it more methodically. The event ended with him demonstrating songs, from spirituals to golden oldies, that might be particularly useful in bolstering the emotions.

For more information on NMSS, visit their Web site. Wallace said that he is hoping to bring more NMSS events to the North County. The local MS support group meets the second Saturday of each month for lunch at Touch of Paso and on the fourth Tuesday of the month at Park Grill in Paso Robles. Both meetings begin at 11:45 p.m.



Photo by Julia Bluff

Devin Wallace plays the guitar for a group of people diagnosed with multiple sclerosis with the aim to use music as a supplement to their medical care.