Dulcimer Harmonies

Gary and Janice Brunk, of Sapulpa, Oklahoma, fill the oncology clinic with sweet sounds.

December 16, 2019 By Gary Brunk

“Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent.”—Victor Hugo

My wife, Janice, and I have been married 58 years, through good and bad times, and we have great fun with music. It’s our primary hobby.

I bought my first mountain dulcimer at an arts and crafts fair 32 years ago when we lived in Atlanta. She spoofed me because I know nothing about music, except that I like it. Janice purchased her first hammer dulcimer 22 years ago. At one time, we formed an amateur musical group, Dulcimer Magic. For stress relief, Jan hammers fast-action Irish jigs, while I prefer to pound out old rock ’n’ roll.

We are both cancer patients. Janice was diagnosed with non–Hodgkin lymphoma 16 years ago and is currently going through chemo infusions again. I was diagnosed with prostate cancer four years ago and underwent three months of daily radiation treatments and hormone therapy injections.

One day during my treatment, the CT machine malfunctioned. While waiting for repairs, the radiologist, Andrew, mentioned he played guitar, and I fessed up to being a dulcimer player. We talked about playing together.

Going home, I kept thinking about the randomness of cancer. It selects you. You have no say in the matter, and I think that is the main reason for the fear, stress, panic and depression when you’re diagnosed.

I took my dulcimer with me into the waiting room a couple of times just to play for myself. It always relaxes me. A number of patients came up and asked questions about the instrument. They remarked that the music was very soothing, especially compared to the waiting room TV. I checked with management about Janice and me playing dulcimer music, even encouraging fellow patients to play their favorite musical instruments, and got the green light.

For three years, we played in the waiting room at my cancer center on Wednesdays. We don’t sing (not even in the shower). We share music, but these aren’t performances, and there are no requirements regarding talent or ability. Any musical instrument qualifies, from accordion to

zither. The only purpose is to share tunes to help others cope through their time of crisis, to help us learn to live each and every day with our common diagnosis.

We named our new hobby 4th Sign of the Zodiac. About a year ago, when Janice's cancer reoccurred, I elected to change my treatment center and go to hers. She has had the same oncologist all this time, and we didn't want to rock the boat after all the years of success. So now we play at her treatment center from 9 a.m. to noon on various days to share music and help others to cope.

As Hans Christian Andersen once wrote, "Where words fail, music speaks."

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