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‘Pershing’s Own’ NCOs help heal wounded Soldiers with music



Staff Sgt. Christy Klenke (left) and Master Sgt. Leigh Ann Hinton of the U.S. Army Band “Pershing’s Own” have developed a music therapy-informed outreach program to help heal the invisible wounds of war for wounded warriors. Klenke is a board-certified music therapist. (Photo by Martha C. Koester / NCO Journal)

By MARTHA C. KOESTER
NCO Journal

As esteemed musicians of The U.S. Army Band “Pershing’s Own,” Staff Sgt. Christy Klenke and Master Sgt. Leigh Ann Hinton has played in countless performances and for many

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distinguished guests. But, for the noncommissioned officers, nothing beats using their music to connect with the small audiences of wounded warriors they meet with once a month at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, as part of their music therapy-informed outreach program.

“We are using our musical talents to aid service members and assist them in their healing, so the outreach that we do is therapeutic,” said Klenke, who plays the French horn in The U.S. Army Ceremonial Band. “We really wanted to be able to do something where our music was just for other service members, and so that they could get the benefits of the music in the same way that we could.”

Klenke and Hinton, along with a few other musicians, meet with service members who are in various stages of recovery at the Fort Belvoir Community Hospital Residential Treatment Center and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. The sessions are casual, and “Pershing’s Own” musicians come in their ACUs.

“The format of our sessions is that we bring a different group of musicians back each month of all different genres and styles,” Klenke said. “We put together a program of five to six short musical pieces as the focus of the group. Instead of us performing, we discuss the music. We talk about how the music makes the participants feel, how the music can change their emotions and moods, and how it relates to memories or things they have experienced. Then, we always try to tie it in to how they can actually use that to help facilitate their recovery. That’s where I get to pull in my background as a music therapist to move that discussion forward.”

Making a difference

The program got its start when former U.S. Army Band Commander Col. Thomas Palmatier introduced Klenke, a board-certified music therapist, and Hinton, a vocalist in U.S. Army Voices and a music therapy enthusiast, in March 2014 at Joint Base Myer-Henderson

Hall, Virginia, and encouraged them to develop an Army Band program. By July 2014, the NCOs were conducting their first session in music therapy-informed outreach. Though it is still a work in progress, Klenke said, they both knew they had a concept that would prove to be beneficial.

“Having [Hinton] as my support and guidance in the whole project has been amazing because she has so much more experience here in the Army Band and she has many more years of leadership,” Klenke said. “She really helped guide me to make sure that I was taking the right steps to make the program a success and helped connect me with the right leadership and the right portions of our command to make sure we had approval for this to move forward.”

Their program lines up with the Army’s resilience training, with similar messages of helping Soldiers thrive at a cognitive level to cope with adversity and to grow from setbacks, Klenke said.

“It’s working the same way to help heal invisible wounds,” she said.

Klenke and Hinton recruit other musicians from “Pershing’s Own” each month to participate in sessions at Fort Belvoir and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center. Though each musician routinely balances a busy schedule of performances — whether funerals in Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, or ceremonies around the Military District of Washington — and training, Klenke and Hinton are never short of volunteers.

“It’s completely on a volunteer basis, and that is what is completely special about the program,” Klenke said. “We try to get the word out to the unit about what we are doing and make sure they know, so that the people who are interested can come. We have members from every single element of the unit participate, so there has just been huge participation.”

Klenke and Hinton meet with a new group each time, and the experience has been incredible, with feedback from the patients to match, Hinton said.

“We work with groups with as little as eight, up to 20,” Hinton said. “We do surveys at the end of sessions, and the feedback has been really great.”

“We hand out surveys at each session, just to get feedback on what we are doing and just to make sure we are on the right track,” Klenke said. “We always get outstanding comments. ... We have had service members tell us that they want to start playing an instrument as their sober activity or something to help them stay on the right path when they are done with their treatment. When we hear that kind of feedback, it just inspires us to keep this program going and keep making it an important part of the Army Band’s mission. Although it’s a small impact because of the size of the groups we meet with, it’s very meaningful to the people who get to experience it.”

Benefits for all

Klenke and Hinton said the musicians are equally as grateful for the experience because they usually don’t get to interact with members of the military on such a personal level.

“It’s amazing that our command has been so supportive of what we do and has made sure that musicians are available to be able to do this outreach, because it’s something that’s very different from typical missions,” Klenke said. “We get amazing feedback from our fellow colleagues, who seem to get a lot out of it as well — just having a chance to talk about their music in that way that’s more of a healing initiative and to be able to have these one-on-one discussions. I think they have gotten a lot of benefit from the program, too.”

The program works because of the music, Klenke said. Klenke and Hinton used “HeartStrings”, a manual from the Madison (Wisconsin) Symphony Orchestra to help organizations create music therapy-informed outreach programs. The Madison Symphony Orchestra has successfully used this type of program to engage with seniors in nursing homes and rehabilitation centers.

“When you are experiencing music that close, you just have a very immediate reaction to it, especially in a small setting like that,” Klenke said. “Everybody is moved by music in some way.”

Their music therapy-informed outreach program has been such a success that Klenke and Hinton said they would like to help other Army bands learn how to do the same type of outreach in their communities.

“The program that we do lasts 1 to 1½ hours, and the way it’s designed is easily replicable,” Hinton said. “It’s something I think would be effective, and we could bring it out and train other people to do the same kind of program that we do.”

The program means everything to Klenke and Hinton, and working with wounded warriors has taught them so much about music. Music has an unparalleled way of reaching out to people, Hinton said.

“Being able to really connect with fellow Soldiers [is very important to me],” Hinton said. “So often, as performers, we are standing up on the stage and we are separated from our audience. This way, they are just up close. It’s a very personal way to communicate. I have learned so much, and I really enjoy working with people that way. So I am hoping that when I leave here, that maybe that’s something I will be able to continue — working with people with music in this capacity.”

“For me, it’s always going to be that passion of helping members of the military,” Klenke said. “I didn’t come from a military family. ... I just have a real passion for finding a way to help integrate [service members] in the community and help bring those two worlds together for them. That’s really the passion that’s ignited in me that I really didn’t have before — it’s serving service members.”