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[Current Issue](#)

[Back Issues](#)

[Guidelines](#)

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The NYC (New York City) Music Therapy Relief Project

A Personal and Professional Odyssey

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"Be careful what you ask for," I thought so many times after September 11th, 2001 and while directing the NYC Music Therapy Relief Project. On 9.11.01, I knew I wanted to help, to offer my expertise and to be able to share the power of music therapy with all those who were suffering from the massive devastation. I was not thinking in particularly large dimensions, more about the individuals whose lives had been impacted. Yet, I ended up being the Field Director for a profound music therapy project. The project was sponsored by the American Music Therapy Association with underwriting support from the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, better known as The Recording Academy or NARAS. This organization sponsors the Grammy awards in the USA which gives awards based on peer review to recognize and honor those in every aspect of the recording industry.

The 9-month project, which lasted from October 2001 through June 2002, was composed of 20 community programs and took place in schools, senior centers, healthcare facilities and other locations throughout the New York City metropolitan area. Thirty-three professional music therapists provided direct client service, facilitating over 7,000 music therapy interventions. Crisis workers, therapists, counselors, social workers, nurses, teachers, school administrators, and guidance counselors were also recipients of music therapy through this project. The protocol that defined who could qualify for our music therapy services was as broad as possible because the attacks on the World Trade Center affected a wide variety of people.

Those are the numbers. I ponder what else I can share with you that will be of true or lasting value. I could tell you about the power of music to support and heal those affected, but you already know that! I could tell you what I learned, but you can find those details at the end of this article.

Anyway, memories fade as time marches on, but a few linger still. The essence that remains is my best teacher. So I will try to share some of this with you.

In the beginning, the time pressure was immense. People were suffering, they needed help, and they needed it fast. How could we proceed without a pre-designed infrastructure? We could not, so we designed one as quickly as possible. Instruments, music therapists, and the people who needed us, had to be located and matched with one another. As I faced the beginning of this project I often had the vision of skydivers or more accurately, paratroopers. They are carefully selected and trained and their destination is determined. Their supplies are meticulously sorted, packed, and assigned. Then, when the moment is right, and all the variables affecting their assignment are aligned, they must jump into action, with a "GO, GO, GO," from the supervising officer. Even then, the outcome is unsure and the jump is, at least in part, an act of faith.

I cannot emphasize enough the energy and effort that it took to get all those variables lined up

and how I waited and worked for that moment- the moment when those instruments would be put into the hands of deeply suffering, traumatized people. The moment when we, the music therapists, would arrive at the predetermined locations and make music with those people, and help to alleviate that suffering. I felt as if my entire life had been in preparation for these moments.

The professional satisfaction came from being able to put my administrative skills to what I felt was effective use - to have the structure serve the function of the program and not the reverse. After all, this was disaster relief and we needed flexibility to foster resiliency- a dynamic that is harmed by traumatic experience. And in my clinical experiences, I had the good fortune to, time and again, experience the ability of music to create community, to provide a feeling of grounding that could be integrated and therefore last, to contain overwhelming feelings of sadness, anger, impotence and futility, and to provide a refuge of beauty and creativity that was stronger than the destruction of September 11th.

Personally, I came to know my relationship to loss and trauma at the core level. There were times when ground zero was an internal phenomenon rather than a concrete place in lower Manhattan. All of these experiences gave me deeper insight into the suffering of those I was trying to reach and to my fellow music therapists who worked so hard and who helped. I have become a more attuned music therapist. And so in some strange way, I feel fortunate to have been given what I asked for. Thank you for listening.

References

The following publications relating to the NYC Music Therapy Relief Project are all available from the American Music Therapy Association (www.musictherapy.org) :

Loewy, J. V. & Frisch Hara, A. (2002) *Caring for the Caregiver: The Use of Music and Music Therapy in Grief and Trauma*. Silver Spring, MD: American Music Therapy Association. (Writings by music therapists and other health professionals and relatives of people lost, all participants in this program.)

Videocassette: *Using Music Therapy in Response to Crisis and Trauma* (Documents one of the programs with adolescents)

Resource kit: *Using Music Therapy in Response to Crisis and Trauma* (A variety of writings, including what I learned professionally about directing a disaster relief project as well as factual information on PTSD and disaster.)

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