Intro to Dorothy video.

Good morning. We’re delighted to be able to share something of our work with you. Music for Life is just so hard to describe. We all struggle when people ask us what we do and so we’ll begin with a short film to show you a little of what it is. I want you to imagine you’re in a large room with us. In the circle are 8 residents with dementia, 3 care staff and in this project we have 4 musicians – they play flute, harp, violin and our oboe player, who is on percussion today. Here in the circle is Dorothy. Up until now has sat in her wheelchair, withdrawn and showing no response to the music sessions. So here we are in session 6 with her.....

Dorothy video

I’d like to hand over to Padraic to set the context of this work.

Linda

Music for Life focuses on enhancing the lives of people living with dementia. But it also looks at a fundamental question we may all ask of ourselves. ‘Who am I?’ Rineke has talked of the title of the book ‘While the music lasts’. I wanted first of all to say a little more about this. After many years of involvement with the MFL project and struggling to describe simply what it is about, I came across a poem by TS Eliot. And these few lines struck me. ‘You are the music while the music lasts.... ’ That was it. The significance lay somewhere in that space between the musician and the person living with dementia. In the moment when
they connect with each other in the most intense and human way, the music is of them. And here, in Dorothy’s small smile, in quiet words or a momentary giggle, it seems that the person with dementia can recognise and find again something of themselves – and in that moment, they are the music, while it lasts. So, thank you Rineke for seeing this as you observed the work on your visits to our project in London. And thank you most specially and most dearly for recognising the importance of that line of poetry!

Music for Life began its life in 1993 at a time when the professional music world was becoming aware of the contribution to be made beyond the concert platform and out in the community. Children in schools were meeting professional musicians in their classrooms and starting to explore how they could make and create music together. Already young people were starting to grow through these new relationships with music and musicians. Through my own work, I had found that disaffected teenagers were starting to find meaning through these connections. I learned from these youngsters that often the most withdrawn or the most challenging were often the most vulnerable. In working with them, I too felt vulnerable and on the edge of my confidence – but strangely the rewards were the greatest. From these young people, many years ago, I learned values and principles and ways of thinking and working that eventually came to underpin the development of Music for Life. When I began to work with older people, recruiting music students to explore with me was not easy. As Padraic says, we tend to box people into compartments – and for these students it seemed they had a view of older people that did not draw them in. But my special group of 6 students did emerge from Guildhall School of Music, protégés of Peter Renshaw’s pioneering Performance and Communication Skills course- and together we laid the foundations of Music for Life which amazingly brings us here today.
Just as with the young teenagers searching for their identity, the question ‘Who am I?’ is a thread that has run through all this work and pervades all levels of the project. It reflects our need to be acknowledged and known and valued for who we are, in some way.

You see me before you. What do you know about me? You know that I am the founder of Music for Life. You may guess something of what motivates me through what you know of my work. You may start to guess something about me as you watch me talk and see me move. My story is hidden from you but if you asked, I could choose to tell you about myself. Now take away my words, my physical capabilities - strip me of all that I am familiar with, my memory. Now see my confidence and my self-esteem ebb away. Who am I now? Inside I am still ‘me’ and can be found. This is the domain in which we work.

The author and neurologist, Oliver Sacks takes this further… ‘A man does not consist of memory alone. He has feeling, will, sensibility, moral being…it is here….you may touch him, and see a profound change’.

I would like you to meet someone now.

Sidney, Sid. Let’s return to our circle with care staff and residents and 3 musicians including Rus our wonderful bass player, and Caroline, one of the original Guildhall students who 21 years later is still with MFL and leads the session. Sid has just returned from hospital having missed some sessions. He sits quietly in his wheelchair. No engagement, head bowed. Making his own choice to be present with us but choosing too not to connect in any way we can recognise. Rus notices that he is randomly tapping the arm of his wheelchair in his own time. Rus starts to gently echo back the tapping. Sid starts to notice this and stops. Caroline gently moves across the room to him, kneels in front of him and says, ‘more Sid?’
Sid slowly responds and begins tapping again. Now the tapping is more regular and seems to be less random. A pattern is emerging. Rus again picks this up and the connection grows into a relationship which draws in the musicians and other residents in the group until an improvised piece grows out of this. Sid stops and all recognise something important has just happened. I reflect on this and realise the pattern was indeed significant. I realise that when Caroline spoke to him, he did not hear ‘More Sid’, but ‘Morse…’ Sid was tapping Morse Code. I go to Sid after the session and talk with him’ Morse code? What emerges very slowly is that during the war, Sid was in the navy as a signaller searching for mines off the coast of Italy. He draws his hand across his chest. He slowly forms the word ‘Med…’ Medals? He nods slowly. He has received medals for this and later his wife shows staff the book and news articles which tell of his bravery. This becomes the basis of work with the staff and my dementia specialist colleagues work with them to discover Sid, the man he was. They are moved by Sid’s story and deeply touched by the way it emerged. In the space between himself and the musician, in the most focussed and patient responsiveness of the musician, he was empowered to rediscover something important of himself, in his own way and in his own time. The staff team have so much more now to influence how they relate to him and it influences their care. They begin to reflect on others in the group and what might be found of them too.

Padraic makes the point that, impacting on staff is a crucial part of the work - and the experiences that bring about change in practice can be powerful. The hour’s debriefing that follows each music session provides protected time for staff in busy daily schedules. Sometimes together with the musicians and sometimes separately, they reflect on personal experiences of the sessions. By seeing the musicians working closely with their residents and
being part of the musical experience themselves, carers often recognise anew the both the vulnerability and also the potential of those they care for. Here they are able to share and explore anything from the joy and significance of small moments of connection to the concern that a resident at some point may be have been led out of his comfort zone by a musician. In this trusting environment difficult questions can be shared and addressed, under the guidance of the dementia facilitator and the project manager. These are the very source of learning for the team, providing new perspectives both on those they care for and about the relationships within their own teams.

Jennifer was a skilled carer who somehow was not a team player. She learned a tough lesson from her colleagues when she disrupted a piece of music they were creating in one session. With reflection and support she has become a team leader, recently receiving an award for her work. Chris was forever curious about the work and when he finally ‘got it’ he not only developed his practice but told of his changed and closer relationship with his family. Troy’s way of observing the music sessions was through sketching, the tiny expressions and body shapes of his residents helped him reflect on them and on his work.

Music for Life presents huge challenges to all of us involved - and for the musicians the wish to connect drives them on to face ever increasing professional and personal challenges and changes them too in the process. Liz, is a professional a bass player with a successful career with a major orchestra. She wanted me to bring her story to you. Hugely reflective, and deeply committed to Music for Life she was somehow frozen and unable to break out of herself to relate personally and musically as she wanted to the people in the circle. After much soul searching she recognised a moment as a student many years previously when she
had frozen in the face of criticism and mockery from her tutor. Supported by fellow musicians, recognising her potential she has now come through and is much more able to contribute and relate in a warm and open way, integrated now with all the musical skill and creativity she has developed in her profession and is so able to respond now to all the subtle clues that you have seen and heard about, that inspire meaningful music and powerful connections and change lives.

And now Esther ...... Esther was a violinist who used to play for silent films. Although her days of playing are long gone, she does eventually rediscover her place with the musicians. As the sessions progress she builds the confidence to bring her violin and finally with her one note, she becomes the fourth musician in the group.

Here she is early on the project, where she first leads the musicians to the music that is still inside her

Esther video