

## **Aging Well with Music – Steve Toll**

Rhythms of Life – From the rhythms of the heartbeat experienced in the womb to the stirring sounds of a marching band, rhythmic patterns and music surround us. Language itself has a musical quality to it and from the beginning of mankind as expressed through chanting and drumming resembled music more closely than speech. Music is primal to life and expressed by each of us every day whether through dancing to a favorite tune, keeping rhythm with a pencil or remembering a special time when hearing a forgotten melody. It is central to our lives and is embedded in our culture defining how we acknowledge milestones, rites of passage and celebrations as well as providing comfort, transformation, and inspiration. Music links us to our world and provides a pathway back to our past.

Scientific research has confirmed that the areas of the brain where musical memories are stored are the last to deteriorate. This explains why individuals who rarely speak will often spontaneously sing when a familiar song is played and those who experience trouble walking are often motivated to stand and dance in place.

Music is shown to have the ability to help organize the brain; especially vital to those who are living with dementia. Usually after a few minutes of music, there are observable affects, such as singing, foot-tapping, and clapping. Studies have shown, as well as our own findings, that the results of a music session last for several hours afterward. Positive results include elevated mood, increased socialization and appetite and reduction in agitation. These benefits are attributed to the stimulation the brain receives during a music session, a sort of “cognitive workout” inspiring us to coin the phrase, “What exercise is to the body, music is to the brain”. The power of music often inspires physical movement and can be used in combination to encourage dance.

The powers of music when focused intentionally can be critical to maintaining quality of life for those living with dementia to help trigger and direct emotions and preserve the connection with others. Music is conducive to keeping those connections strong while helping the person to focus, increase awareness and orient to the environment. As speech, writing and other traditional forms of communication are comprised, music provides an alternative means of connection. Several research studies have looked at music as an important adjunct to medical treatment and findings suggest a possible link between the use of music and slowing the progression of dementia.

This program will introduce the music that inspires and connects us to the older adult population and gives us powerful tools to build amazing relationships. We will discuss and experience how to use these tools of meaningful connection and open the opportunity to communicate with everyone regardless of real or imagined differences between us. Here is an example of how one song created a beautiful connection and made someone’s day:

*I could tell that everyone was enjoying the music as they were singing along and tapping their feet to the rhythm and at the end of the event a petite gray-haired woman wearing a bright red outfit came walking up to me leaning on her walker. She said, “my name is, Meredith and you played our favorite song”. I asked her which one it was, and she said, “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered written by Rogers and Hart”. She went on to explain that she and her husband Bob had lived in Hackensack, NJ and raised a*

*family of three children. That song had meaning to her because Bob, who served in the Army was home on leave and they went into New York city to see the show, "Pal Joey" which featured that song. She said that she remembered going to the theatre that day after a wonderful dinner and holding hands with her husband as they listened to that song. In that moment she had transported herself back to that time and she was beaming with joy. As we spoke her memories were more detailed and complete and she seemed very calm. She told me that she loves listening to the songs of her life with her husband because the music makes her feel safe and comfortable.*

*She thanked me for helping her to bring back that wonderful moment in her past and said how important it is for her and her community to have these events. She went on to say, "I know that I'm getting older, and I may not be able to do some of the things I used to do, but nothing can stop my memories from bringing me back to those times and I feel as close to Bob as I ever did in those days". You know, she said, "love never dies". As she slowly walked away, I was struck with how youthful and vibrant she seemed and how in that moment I had helped her.*