

Music that heals

A guitar leans in one corner, a banjo rests against another wall inside the small, neutral-colored room. Well-cushioned chairs are arranged near a keyboard

BY **MELISSA BLANTON**
staff writer

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perched on a stand and drums that are within reach. Soft oboe music permeates the quietness.

The soothing setting has its purpose – it's aimed at providing therapy via the language of music.

"We're kind of the best kept secret in

health care," said Justine Dunnivant, a Greenville-based music therapist.

The modern day practice has been around since the World War I era. Though the first degree program didn't arrive until 1944 at Michigan State University.

The profession now has its own professional organization – the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA). The group was founded in 1998 after two similar organizations merged. There are about 3,500 members.

Dunnivant has been playing music for as long as she can remember. So the idea of using the art form to make a living was always her plan. She grew up playing mostly bluegrass music. But Simon and Garfunkel were a favorite as well.

She first heard about music as therapy while attending a music camp.

"I know that it (music) can be healing," she said.

But before someone can call themselves a certified music therapist they must earn a bachelor's degree and complete an internship in the field.

Dunnivant attended Radford University in Virginia, where she double majored in voice and French horn with a concentration in music therapy.

As part of her degree program, Dunnivant spent six months at the Porterville, Calif., Development Center.

And the experience helped solidify the power of music therapy for Dunnivant. Her favorite part of the half-year internship was the time she spent with juveniles in detention.

"There's so much potential for change," she said.

It wasn't rare to see rival gang members together in one room, participating in drum circles or other musical activities without tempers flaring.

But music therapy's use isn't limited to troubled youth. It's also used extensively with cancer patients, those suffering from autism, Parkinson's disease and other illnesses.

"Music therapy is very much present in hospital settings," said Dunnivant.



Julie Turner/Staff

SONGSTRESS: Justine Dunnivant has been playing bluegrass music since she was a child.

See **MUSIC THERAPY, PG 62**

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MUSIC THERAPY CONTINUED FROM 61...

And insurance companies are increasingly picking up the tab for the treatments, according to the AMTA. The association reports since 1994, music therapy has qualified as a reimbursable service, though insurance companies consider payment on a case-by-case basis.

In addition to Dunnivant's degree and internship she also had to take an exam to become board certified, earning her the MT-BC designation.

Dunnivant, who is now in private practice, approaches each client differently. After assessing the client, she maps out an individual plan, which she said is a key element to treatment. Since every person is different, every approach will be as well.

"We are a process-centered product," she said. That means some clients will learn to play a new instrument while others will write and perform songs.

"Music can be such a comforting element," said Dunnivant. "It's such a powerful experience."

Music in everyday life is important as well, she said. When someone is feeling sad or depressed, it's not necessarily best to pump up the volume on a peppy song. Instead, music that fosters that emotion can help a person deal with an issue rather than cover it up.

Regardless of musical tastes, said Dunnivant, preferences get incorpo-

rated into the sessions. From rap and hip hop to country and classical. It's about meeting people where they're at, she said.

Learning to play an instrument is another activity Dunnivant encourages everyone to try. Playing music requires focus and the use of both sides of the brain, something not required by many activities.

"It's a very healthy experience," she said.

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WANT TO KNOW MORE?

www.ariarustic.com

www.musictherapy.org
(American Music Therapy Association)

www.cbmt.org
(Certification Board for Music Therapists)

or call 552-9890



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THE BEAT: Drums are one of the instruments Justine Dunnivant uses in her music therapy sessions.