

MELODIC MEMORIES

**NC State students help older adults
connect with music of their past**

BY ORLA SWIFT

In a dance unlike any that freshman Skye Zambrano has tried before, she places her fingers in the outstretched hand of the elderly woman in front of her. The woman, Lila*, smiles warmly as their eyes meet, and she begins swinging their hands side to side, then up and down, bouncing to a lively salsa beat.

Skye can't hear the beat, but Lila can, and that's all that matters. In this joyful moment, Lila is dancing with a dear friend at a family reunion, at a nightclub, or perhaps a street festival pulsing with noise and laughter.

It could be any of those places, or none, but what's important is this: she is not sitting in a chair at a table in an elderly care center in Durham. She is wherever her memories have brought her in that moment, as the strains of familiar music flow from an iPod to her headphones and into her eager mind.

The pair met through Music & Memory, a national nonprofit organization that seeks to enrich the lives of elderly people who have Alzheimer's, dementia or other cognitive and physical challenges by providing them with iPods and other digital devices filled with familiar music.

Senior CommUnity Care of North Carolina, a Durham-based program that serves elderly residents in Wake, Durham and parts of Granville counties, contacted NC State University after receiving Music and Memory certification and a grant enabling it to purchase 30 iPod Shuffles and headsets, and \$1,500 worth of iTunes gift cards. They hoped to interest some students in downloading music and loading it onto the iPods.

Amy Sawyers, coordinator for arts outreach at Arts NC State, and ►

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the instructor for the Arts Forum, an experiential arts course that students living in the university's Arts Village are required to take, saw potential for a deeper involvement. In the Arts Forum, students attend 12 arts events per semester, selecting from a list of 100 classes, workshops, performances and other opportunities. Sawyers asked if the students could come to Durham and work directly with the elderly participants. From that proposal, the local Music and Memory Project was born.

"My background is in applied arts, and I see tremendous value in students not only experiencing art as audience members but using art to engage with their community via service-related work," says Sawyers. "My master's thesis was about creating an intergenerational storytelling project, and I saw firsthand how using art as a platform for sharing in an intergeneration space was really rewarding for all involved."

Skye, a math and math education major who loves music and how it makes her feel, eagerly signed up. After her first of three visits, she was sold on the program's restorative power.

"Having a passion for music, I can see how music has effects on my life, but to see how it affected the residents was completely eye-opening," she wrote in an email to Sawyers after her first visit. "It was amazing to watch how certain people started off sleeping, watching television, being silent, or not being

at all interactive. Once the headphones came on, the excitement just flooded them. There was a man who rarely communicated with the workers; he began making verbal sounds once his iPod started playing. While his words were slurred and not understandable, he had still made his own progress."

Skye was immediately at ease with the participants on the second visit, sitting quietly with them but keenly sensitive to whatever level of communication they sought. With one man, that amounted to only an occasional smile or nodding to a shared rhythm. With Lila, there was something deeper, in part because Skye understood Lila's native Spanish, but also, Skye speculated, because she reminded Lila of someone from her past. Lila offered chatty observations to Skye throughout her visit, occasionally reaching out to touch Skye's face or stroke her hair.

Nearby, Davis Ranson, a junior majoring in biomechanical engineering, scrolled through iTunes to find more music for the iPods. The top requested genres – garnered from the participants' relatives and staff members who had come to know them – were Latin, gospel, Hindu and country music. At a nurse's request, she was now gathering Selena tunes for Lila, because Selena makes Lila want to get up and dance.

Davis says she got involved in Arts Village to provide some balance with her highly technical studies. Her role this year is to drive students to arts events, but



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she was eager to participate more actively in this special project.

"I thought it would be a good opportunity to see how the arts continue to play a role in people's lives beyond just appreciating creativity," she said. "I'm not sure what I was expecting when I came here, but it's been really neat how everybody seems to respond in different ways."

Kyra Schor, community outreach coordinator for New York-based Music & Memory, said she loves how students are beginning to get involved with the organization.

"At Music & Memory, we believe that the power of our program comes from meaningful interactions that personalized music playlists help spark," Schor says. "Thus, the most important benefit of student volunteer organizations is the human connection and compassion they bring to care organization residents on a regular basis."

Sawyers hopes to expand the Music & Memory Project for the spring semester, opening it up to all NC State students and inviting Music Department students in particular.

"I am really proud of our Arts Village students for leading this effort," she says, "and for reaching outside of their campus community into the Triangle community to use art as a vehicle for community building and service."

They'll have plenty of opportunities with Senior CommUnity Care, which is now using the iPods daily in two activity rooms, according to marketing manager Kimberley R.P. Ladue. They're also considering seeking a grant to provide additional music therapy programs.

"Truly, the gift of music – the power that it brings and the benefits of being able to reach someone thought to be unreachable – is priceless," she says. "But so is the lesson that the students may have gleaned: that we come in all shapes and sizes, we grow to be many things, and each of us is worth reaching out to." •

**Lila's name was changed for this article, in order to adhere to federal health care privacy regulations.*

MORE INFORMATION:

musicandmemory.org

seniorcommunitycarenc.org

arts.ncsu.edu/about/arts-outreach

Orla Swift was a theatre critic and arts reporter at the News & Observer and other newspapers for 20 years, and is now director of marketing and communications at Sarah P. Duke Gardens.