

The April CFAMC Devotional Page

This month we are going to talk about... well... devotion. That is, the ways in which God leads us to devote our gifts and talents to Him. Our friend and brother Devin Arrington has had a unique experience with God around this subject, and so this month I post the story of his organization, Musicians with a Mission, with minimal comment. My first comment is simply James 1:27 --"Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."

Musicians With A Mission (MWAM)

(from Devin Arrington)

"While still in high school I had some wonderful experiences playing my violin for terminal patients. One lady had been caring for her husband at home for 10 years following a massive stroke that left him with little to do except sit in front of a television all day. After playing the piece *Meditation* from "Thais" for him, I heard a soft voice say, "That was beautiful." These were his first words all day. His wife told me emphatically that she had *never* heard him declare something to be beautiful since the time of his stroke. For a brief moment this man emerged from a cocoon of darkness; there was joy all around as he felt the beauty and human connection that music can provide.

On another occasion I went with a high school pianist friend to "Bread and Roses," a home for those in the final stages of AIDS. We set up in the lobby and gradually accepted the fact that we were apparently playing for the one person who had come to hear us. After one of our sets the manager told us that a number of patients had asked that their doors be opened so that they could better hear the music – they were simply too weak to make the journey to the lobby. This experience taught me at an early age that our acts of service often have a greater impact than we initially realize.

While in graduate school for music I became increasingly aware of how many hours musicians spend alone in practice "cells." Upon graduation in 2004 I began a violin studio and had the luxury of many hours of practice time in the morning before students arrived. Over time I found my own violin playing at risk of becoming "selfish" and the many hours of practice discouraging when there were no laurels, no worldly prizes or auditions being won. And so it was in 2010 that I felt God strongly calling me to do something and I sought discernment. Thankfully, within a few weeks I had an answer and formed Musicians With A Mission to encourage more of Pittsburgh's talented musicians to perform in local healthcare settings. In a nutshell, MWAM seeks to take two groups of people that often spend significant time in isolation – musicians and the elderly – and encourage

them to enjoy mutual companionship in the context of great music. There is great appeal for musicians in joining such an “orchestra” of volunteers and being able to meet and perform with other service-minded musicians. The 21 volunteer forms submitted in a single year via the website www.musicianswithamission.org indicate that Pittsburgh area musicians are eager to share their gifts with the elderly if given some encouragement and incentives.

Some of the benefits of music for the elderly:

Among older individuals, music can provide meaningful stimulation and enjoyment and thereby help to reduce chronic pain and stress. In a paper commissioned in 2011 by Carnegie Hall’s Weill Music Institute, Lea Wolf and Dr. Thomas Wolf describe how “music works across a person’s lifespan to develop, protect, and to repair the brain” while examining a decade worth of studies showing music to be cost-effective in the treatment of Parkinson’s Disease, Alzheimer’s, dementia, and depression. Jennifer Gorske, MWAM Advisory Board member and certified music therapist, states of her experience working in healthcare settings: “I witnessed remarkable changes in the physical, social, and emotional responses of individuals in the context of a music interaction. I saw improvements in behavior including increased interest, interaction, cognitive function, movement, and mood.” Christa Magness, Activity Director at UPMC Heritage Place and MWAM Healthcare Partner states: “Music has a major impact on our residents and when someone comes to play at a nursing home it is like having live music in your home. No matter what deficits the elderly have as they age, music still touches each person significantly. The personal attention and dedication by the MWAM musicians means so much to our residents, and we wish them all the best!”

Vision for the next 1-2 years:

There are currently 14 nursing homes and 6 personal care homes in central Allegheny County. A \$4,500 Seed Award grant from The Sprout Fund in August 2011 enabled Musicians With A Mission to implement a pilot program in 5 of these healthcare settings. Since launching in November 2011, MWAM has coordinated over 100 solo and chamber music performances.

Musicians With A Mission will bring its talented musicians into at least 10 additional personal care and nursing homes in central Allegheny County while continuing to improve the service offered to its 5 current healthcare partners. The overall goal is that at least 1,000 elderly persons will have access to the diverse skill sets of MWAM’s volunteers. Specific objectives include recruiting more talented and service-minded musicians, doubling the number of performances to at least 100 per year, and raising awareness in the community about the benefits of live music for the elderly.

Because most activity directors at nursing and personal care homes do not have a method of screening musicians, they must rely on word of mouth. This sometimes results in unknown musicians misrepresenting themselves and disappointing the residents. As a result, many project activity directors end up with the same 2-3 musicians coming time after time. MWAM remedies this problem by providing a list of screened musician volunteers along with their bios on its website. MWAM’s Director will also meet with the activity directors at these new healthcare locations to:

- 1) Assess the residents’ current access to live music.
- 2) Ascertain best days/times for musical performances as well as desired quantity.

- 3) Listen to the musical needs of the project activity directors and answer questions.
- 4) Identify MWAM musicians especially appropriate for the location.

In addition to recruiting new musicians, the Director will also continue to inform current musicians of volunteer opportunities through weekly e-mail requests from participating nursing and personal care homes. Following each performance, the musicians will complete a brief questionnaire documenting the number of attendees and audience feedback. The Director, in turn, will make recommendations regarding piece selection, tempo, and audience interaction. By coordinating the logistics of each performance, the Project Director frees musicians to focus on their music and their audience.

Vision in 20 years:

MWAM provides a model for musicians and healthcare facilities in other cities to work together toward the good of the elderly.”

In my personal life, I am being led by the Lord to look at music's effects on the young, and the community they are in – if you have seen the mass Yahoo post, you know I have been moved by the Lord to put together an educational fundraiser concert for one of my students ... a student who is the only Christian in her family. I am not going to talk about that in detail here (that's for May's page); my point is that God has uses for us and our gifts far beyond what our culture (outside AND inside the organized church) suggests we are good for. God put us here to minister in whatever way He sees fit with our music, according to His leading – our true devotion to Him is to follow where He leads. The way the Lord is leading Devin is an inspiration to me this very day; I offer it to all of us so that we might be inspired to each follow God on HIS mission of reaching this dying world with His love and grace!