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TORONTO THE BETTER

Inside this Toronto hospital's palliative care unit, a choir sings songs of comfort from Bob Marley to Elvis

In this choir, songs are not just a performance but a way to ease pain and offer solace to patients and their families during their final days.

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The Comfort Choir performs “Love Me Tender” for patient Linsey Bell at Michael Garron Hospital, who requested songs from the ‘50s, the musical decade her parents loved when she was young.

Michelle Mengsu Chang Toronto Star

By Megan Ogilvie Health Reporter

The Comfort Choir waits outside the hospital room to find out what they’ll sing.

It could be a folk song, a favourite hymn or a catchy musical theatre tune. They hope the patient is well enough to choose.

One of the singers is with the patient now, letting them know a volunteer choir is here in the palliative care unit at Michael Garron Hospital, ready to sing them a song.

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A moment later, choir member Cathy Hunt steps back into the hallway and smiles.

“She’s asked for something upbeat,” Hunt says. “We’ve decided on ‘Lean on Me.’”

The six singers open their binders and flip to the timeless song. It’s one they know well.

Soon, they are in the hospital room and singing to the patient — an older woman sitting in a wheelchair. When the final notes fade, she asks for a second song and the choir quickly settles on Bob Marley’s “Three Little Birds.”

In this choir, songs are not just a performance but a way to ease pain and offer solace to patients and their families during their final days.

With TV’s “Judge Judy” on mute, the patient’s eyes close as she hears the choir sing in three-part harmony that “every little thing is going to be alright.”

The Comfort Choir has been singing at Michael Garron since 2012. Founder Susanne Maziarz says she knew from the first session that singing to people near the end of life helped ease their pain.

“One patient we sang for that day, they were crunched up, holding themselves tight,” Maziarz recalls. “As we sang, their muscles relaxed — like they were letting go — and they fell asleep.”

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the choir sang weekly on the hospital’s complex continuing care unit and to patients receiving palliative care. They stopped the music for more than three years at the height of COVID and returned in the fall of 2023 to sing once a month.



Susanne Maziarz, founder of the Comfort Choir, says singing to people near the end of life helps ease their pain.

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But it didn't feel like enough. The choir likes to take requests and learn new songs for their next visit. Going monthly meant patients often died before their return.

"You can't say 'we'll see you next month' if you don't know whether you'll see them again," says Allison Kabayama, one of the choir's original members.

This year, they plan to sing twice a month to regain their connection with patients.

At the start, the choir was made up of volunteers from the Neighbourhood Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Riverdale, where Maziarz is the musical director. Over time, others from outside the congregation joined.



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At the nursing home where her late mother lived, she and her husband are counsellors, singers and talk show hosts

Kabayama says some singers aren't comfortable near those who are dying or grieving and have trouble putting their own sadness aside.

"It can be challenging, when people are overcome by emotion or when you see suffering," she says. "But we focus on the patients. It's not a performance. We know we are there for others in need."

The choir currently has eight members, though Maziarz says no more than five typically sing at one time. Too many people can crowd a small hospital room. Even then, she says, members sing softly, mindful to not overwhelm a patient.



Members of the Comfort Choir perform classic rock songs for patient Joe Lum and his wife, June Murray Lum, at their request.

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Over the years, the choir has collected more than a hundred songs they organize in binders by genre and decade. There are Christian hymns and gospels, folk songs and country ballads, simple chorale melodies, and movie or musical theatre hits, ranging from "Sunrise, Sunset" to "My Favourite Things."

For the '50s, there is Elvis. For the '60s, The Beatles and The Temptations. When a patient asks for a cheery song, the choir may turn to "A Spoonful of Sugar" from "Mary Poppins" or a snappy version of "You Are My Sunshine." When the mood is more sombre, "Amazing Grace" is an enduring favourite.

Today they have added Christmas music to their binders. It's early December and they know some patients will want the comfort of their favourite holiday song.

Gerald Schamerhorn, a patient in the complex continuing care unit, has joined the choir in the atrium down the hall from his fifth-floor room. From his wheelchair, he sings along to "Deck the Halls," his voice getting louder at each *fa-la-la-la* chorus.



Gerald Schamerhorn, a patient in the complex continuing care unit, joins in singing Christmas carols performed by the Comfort Choir in the atrium.

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As the choir goes from room to room, many patients choose songs from their youth or ones tied to a favourite memory. Choir members know these tunes remind them of happier times.

At the end of the hall, Frank Tan requests a song from the '50s. His daughter, sitting near his bed, is thankful.

"He loves music," she says after "Que Sera, Sera" by Doris Day. "He used to sing when my mother played piano."

Another patient, Linsey Bell, explains that she's on this floor because "I'm on my way out." She also asks for songs from the '50s, the musical decade her parents favoured when she was young.

Throughout "Love Me Tender," Bell lies on her back with her eyes closed, her frail hands on her chest. She taps her fingers along with the music and whispers a few words of the Elvis hit. Her family, who tells visitors that Bell loves to dance, can't hold back their tears.

Sandra Marche, a palliative care nurse specialist at Michael Garron, says she's seen how music helps alleviate pain but also the "existential suffering" people face at the end of life. She says the Comfort Choir provides moments of peace to families and staff as much as to patients.



Members of the Comfort Choir sing for patient Frank Tan, with his daughter by his side.

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“This isn’t just a place where people come to die,” Marche says. “We want to infuse as much life as possible into the time that our patients are here.”

Before they leave, the choir visits a couple who requests soft rock classics. They start with John Denver, then move to The Beatles.

Out in the hall, a porter wheels an elderly patient lying on a stretcher. His eyes are closed. There is still a chance he can hear the choir’s gentle rendition of “Let It Be.”

Six comfort choir singers

Since the day it opened in 1929, volunteers have been essential to Michael Garron Hospital. Currently, its 550 volunteers contribute roughly 50,000 hours a year, and in total have raised more than \$5 million to support hospital initiatives.

Volunteers, including those in its student program, range in age from 14 to 96, and the longest-serving volunteer has been with Michael Garron since 1965. Denny Petkovski, chief of facility operations and volunteer services, says volunteers are crucial across the organization, from its pet therapy program to helping in clinical areas, including the emergency department, to providing directions to patients and visitors.

The Comfort Choir has been singing at Michael Garron since April 2012 (with a three-year pause during the COVID-10 pandemic).

The Star met with six choir members in early December. While each has a different reason for volunteering, they all said singing at the hospital helps them as much as their songs help patients.

Susanne Maziarz

The musical director at the Neighbourhood Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Riverdale, Maziarz laid the foundations for the Comfort Choir in the fall of 2011. Along with a few congregation members, Maziarz chose 10 songs she thought would work best in palliative care and the singers rehearsed for about six months before their first hospital visit. She says the Comfort Choir provides care for the “spirit and the soul” and that “those moments of connected humanity” not only help patients but also families, staff and the choir members themselves.

Favourite choir song: “How Can I Keep from Singing,” a Christian hymn that became a popular American folk song. “It sums up our work; no matter what is going on, still we sing.”

Shirley Roll

A longtime singer, Roll has been with the Comfort Choir for 10 years. She joined because she wanted to help people near the end of life, and finds singing to patients “deeply satisfying.”

“Some days, it’s exceptionally moving the way they respond.”

Favourite choir song: “I am With You” by Phyllida Anam-Aire, a former Irish nun, author and therapist.

“When my mother was in her 90s and hospitalized, I managed to sing her to sleep with that song.”

Cathy Hunt

After her husband died in 2017, Hunt says she knew she wanted to volunteer with patients receiving palliative care. She says having cared for her husband meant she wasn’t afraid of the “critical moments of life and death” in a hospital. She connected with the Comfort Choir after Googling “singing” and “palliative care” and has been a member since 2018.

“You’re not just giving, you’re getting a lot back.”

Favourite choir song: “Golden” by Toronto singer-songwriter Ken Whiteley. “It’s about being in this moment and nothing else.”

Martha Davis

Volunteering was Davis’ goal after retiring in 2017. She started by taking her therapy dog to retirement homes and felt “bereft” when they shut during COVID. Davis has been with the Comfort Choir for two years, an experience she calls “incredibly rewarding.”

Favourite choir song: “Dona Nobis Pacem.” Davis says the choir sings the round in three parts, which makes it “soaring and beautiful.”

Catherine Mahler

Though she still works, Mahler has an arrangement with her boss that allows her to come to the hospital to sing with the Comfort Choir. She joined in 2018 and says singing with the group offers an up-close glimpse at life’s big emotions, for which she is grateful.

“We see it all: sadness, awe, wonder, joy. For me, the choir is not just about giving but also receiving.”

Favourite choir song: “I like to sing what gives the patient joy.”

Deidrie Gardner

An original member, Gardner says singing with the Comfort Choir has taught her how to harmonize with others. “It feels wonderful when you sync with other people’s voices.” She says each patient “has their own spirit” and that families are equally moved by the choir’s music.

“Families tend to let down their guard when we’re there; often they’ll start weeping.”

Favourite choir song: “Amazing Grace” “I love when the harmonies come together.”

As part of the Star’s ongoing Toronto the Better initiative, this year we’ll highlight the people and organizations making a difference in the GTA and share volunteering opportunities that can inspire real change. Know of a person or group deserving of the spotlight? Email torontothebetter@thestar.ca

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