

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

March 8, 2007

The Face of Philanthropy

By Brennen Jensen

Sung to Their Rest



Photograph by Vern Uvetake/The Lake Oswego Review

While all musicians strive to please and entertain people with their music, Sharilyn Cohn, a harpist and vocalist, carries an extra burden: Her music may be some of the last sounds her listeners ever hear.

Ms. Cohn is a "music thanatologist," a performer who plays music for people who are dying or near death. The specialized music she creates aims to lessen physical and psychological pain while easing fears.

"We create an intimate space," she says, "and a peaceful feeling of calmness."

All music thanatologists play the harp. Ms. Cohn says the instrument was chosen for its soothing tone and timbre as well as its "archetypal, cultural connotations." Performances are tailored to a dying individual's needs and physical state, with tempos often adjusted to match respiratory rates.

Formerly a professional cellist, Ms. Cohn learned about music thanatology from a television program 10 years ago and found her new calling. In 2004, she and a fellow music thanatologist, Barbara Cabot, created SacredFlight, a charity in Portland, Ore., for which the pair now perform some 350, hourlong bedside performances a year. These "music vigils," as Ms. Cohn refers to them, are also for the benefit of any friends and family members gathered at the patient's side.

SacredFlight doesn't charge families or individuals for performances. The bulk of the group's \$150,000 annual budget comes from hospitals and hospices that pay for SacredFlight's services. The charity also receives private donations, holds a series of fund-raising concerts, and sells a benefit CD featuring performances by Ms. Cohn and others.

Here, Ms. Cohn performs for Lois Brown, a dementia patient, and her husband, Preston Brown.

"It is a great privilege to be present when someone dies and makes their transition," Ms. Cohn says. "The comfort we bring nourishes and sustains us for this work."

Copyright © 2007 The Chronicle of Philanthropy