

Music-thanatologists provide comfort during life's final journey

by Inara Verzemnieks, The Oregonian
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Motoya Nakamura, The Oregonian
Trish Weaver is among the graduates of a new training program for music-thanatologists offered through Lane Community College.

This afternoon at a church on Portland's west side, eight students will graduate from an unusual new training program: They have spent the past two years learning how to be music-thanatologists.

It's a relatively new career -- developed during the past three decades -- with ancient roots.

Drawing from a tradition that traces back to the Middle Ages, when the monks of Cluny, France, included rituals of song in their care of the dying, modern-day music-thanatologists use harps and their voices to soothe the pains of people whose lives are ending. In Oregon, several hospitals and hospices and nursing homes offer the services of music-thanatologists to patients receiving palliative care.

To be clear: This is not about playing music for the sake of aesthetics. As music-thanatologists explain it, this is music used deliberately and specifically, like a medicine -- music that is carefully tailored to each person, based on information gleaned from the patient's chart, his or her vital signs, conversations with caregivers, as well as intense observation on the part of the music-thanatologists -- all with the intention of giving the patient whatever respite he or she needs most, whether it's a chance to sleep or to relax or to process bad news.

Music-thanatologists don't come in with a set list to play. You will not recognize the songs exactly, drawn from the raw elements of music, then composed in each unfolding moment. And yet, the music often triggers a sense of the familiar, like something you forgot you always knew.

Which brings us back to today's graduation and the inaugural class of this music-thanatology training, offered through [Lane Community College](#) and founded by two local music-thanatologists: Jane Franz, who works at [PeaceHealth Sacred Heart Medical Center](#) in Eugene and Sharilyn Cohn of [SacredFlight](#), a Portland nonprofit.

Although music-thanatology is a profession meant to help us to face our deaths, when you trace the reasons that led people to this career path it almost always begins with a radical decision about how they wanted to live.

Trish Weaver is one of the students graduating today.

Weaver, 56, is a registered nurse who works at [Kaiser Sunnyside Medical Center](#), and had always felt, as she puts it, "an affinity for working with people who were at the end of life."

One day, about three years ago, she remembers hearing a harp in the hospital; it turned out to be one of the music-thanatologists from SacredFlight.

Weaver had already been thinking about how she missed having music in her life (she played piano and flute as a child, though "I did everything I could to get out of practicing ..."). She had also been thinking about how strongly she felt about working with people who are dying, how she might be able to do that even more.

The idea of music-thanatology, the combination of these things, intrigued her, but at that point she didn't think of it as a career possibility. She dismissed her interest in the harp at the time as "silly -- why would you want to do that at this time in your life?" she remembers thinking.

Two years passed.

And she tells this story:

"My brother was 50, and he learned how to fly."

Inspired, Weaver found her thoughts returning to the harp. She called about lessons, and within a month she had purchased her own instrument.

Then:

"During that time my brother who had learned to fly had died of cancer."

Not long after, as Weaver was working in the oncology unit one day, someone mentioned the music-thanatology training through Lane. "And I thought, "This is it.""

Even before she was accepted, she got a new car -- a station wagon -- so she could easily haul around her harp. And she changed jobs at Kaiser so she could work part time.

Now Weaver is graduating, hoping to split her time between her job as a nurse and a new career as a music-thanatologist.

"I'm so glad I listened to myself," she says. "So many of us don't listen to ourselves."

Weaver and her classmates spent two years doing classroom work that covered such topics as anatomy and physiology, pharmacology and medical terminology, as well weekly voice and harp lessons and a comprehensive research paper. Students also were required to spend roughly five hours a week interning in a clinical setting alongside music-thanatologists certified by [Music-Thanatology Association International](#).



Motoya Nakamura, The Oregonian
In an empty room at Kaiser Permanente Sunnyside Medical Center, Trish Weaver (from left), Sharilyn Cohn and Jenelle Balzer-Ediger demonstrate what the work of a music-thanatologist entails. Weaver and Balzer-Ediger, both registered nurses who work at Kaiser, are among the first graduates of the new music-thanatology training. Cohn, a certified music-thanatologist is one of the training's founders and directors.

Before we finish talking, Weaver offers another story: As a nurse, she has been in the room when patients have been removed from life support. She has also experienced it as a music-thanatologist-in-training, playing alongside her mentor, through the process. The difference was striking, she says. In the latter, "It was so much calmer. People were holding hands. ... In the end a physician came in to declare the person dead, and

the family went up to the physician and gave him a hug. That never happens. It changed the whole environment."

Another nurse from Kaiser -- Jenelle Balzer-Ediger, a hospice nurse -- also completed the training.

As this is written, a woman from Salt Lake City steers her car toward Portland.

Another will come soon from Spokane. (Her daughter is coming from Paris.) A couple who met, and married, during the course of the training will leave their home in Ashland. All bound for the same place, along with four others. There is not enough room for all their stories, the miles they covered to get here -- only fragments of the larger whole that will converge at graduation today:

Catharine Scherer of Spokane called as soon as she learned this training was being offered two years ago. "They didn't even have the applications ready." Through the years she had variously taught music at an elementary school, been a full-time mom, worked as a management consultant. "My mother had died, my children were gone, my husband of 25 years had left, and I was ready to step into whatever this next step was. I was ready to apply immediately."

She is 58.

James Excell had been building and playing Celtic harps since 1982. A self-described "eclectic esotericist" who works as a window clerk for the U.S. Postal Service in Ashland, he says taking these classes was "like coming home."

"I really feel like the previous 40 years I had been preparing for this," he says.

And then there is Elizabeth Markell.

A massage therapist, she started offering her services to people in hospice, which in turn introduced her to music-thanatology.

"Part of why I was drawn to this work," Markell says, "was my own experience around death and dying in our culture. When my mom died in 1999, I flew across the country to be with her, and she died some hours after I got there. ... The nurse said, 'I am going to wash her body.' I asked if I could help and she said, 'I don't think it's a good idea.' And I was too tired to argue with her, but it just felt so strange to me. Here's this person who gave birth to you, and it's not OK for you to be part of her death?"

"I wanted to do this to be a part of creating ways to be less afraid ... to be a part of creating more openness and support around death in our culture."

Elizabeth, 47, and James, 55, celebrated their first wedding anniversary along with their fellow students, by taking their final, eight-hour comprehensive exam, covering everything they had learned about death and life.

The next music-thanatology training begins in January 2010; the deadline for applications is Aug. 28. Details:
www.lanec.edu/ce/music

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