

Forensic program: Mental healthcare through songwriting

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A therapeutic guitar group at the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre's Integrated Forensic Program evolved from a pilot project into a unique songwriting initiative that enhances participants' mental well-being and social connections through music therapy

A new therapeutic guitar group in the Forensic Program that started as a modest pilot project unexpectedly became a songwriting program that brings joy, camaraderie, and harmony to participants and volunteers alike.

The group originated from recreation therapist Ashleigh McGuinty's desire to bring a music program to the Forensic Assessment Unit at the Royal Ottawa Mental Health Centre.

Clients in the Forensic Program face unique challenges. Many experience what's known as a "double stigma" due to their mental health and involvement in the legal system. McGuinty, who has worked in forensics since 2018, says many of the people she sees in her program were deprived of leisure time and opportunities to learn new things when they were young.

"We have people who turned to alcohol and drugs and smoking when they were kids as young as eight or nine, or they had traumatic experiences in their lives, so they never played sports or had the opportunity to pick up an instrument," McGuinty says. "This makes leisure sampling even more important."

An opportunity for leisure sampling

Leisure sampling involves exposing individuals to different recreational activities to help them discover their interests and preferences. In a forensic setting, it helps people find positive and constructive ways to spend their time, reducing boredom and negative behaviours. It also promotes mental well-being, social skills, and a sense of accomplishment, aiding their rehabilitation.

Inspired by the "Guitars for Vets" style programs, which match veterans with donated guitars and lessons, McGuinty connected with Dr. Gilles Comeau, the Director of the University of Ottawa Music and Health Research Institute (MHRI) and senior scientist at the University of Ottawa Institute for Mental Health Research (IMHR) at The Royal. Together, they had the idea of starting a guitar group. Comeau approached a contact of his, Ottawa musician Michael Fahey, to lead it.

An inspired transition from basic instruction to songwriting

No one expected the guitar group – initially planned as a simple weekly guitar lesson – to turn into a songwriting project. A gratitude exercise inspired their first composition. The notes were given to Fahey, who used them to compose a song simply called “Gratitude.” The lyrics evoke the joy of simple things we normally take for granted – blue skies, sunny days, the stars above. Reading between the lines, of course, is the understanding that these gifts become infinitely more precious when they are out of reach.

The group’s second track, titled “Forensic Blues,” was borne out of a songwriting session in which the clients shared their raw and honest reflections about their daily experiences on the unit:

“I got the for-en-sic blues, oh baby, Got it way down in my shoes,
Can you help me lose,
These forensic blues.”

“So do you catch my meaning, do you see what I mean,
I’d be ready to scream,
if it wasn’t for my team.
If it wasn’t for my nurse,
I’d be ridin’ in a hearse.
How do you like this picture of my universe.”

Nicole is a client in the Forensic Program and a member of the guitar group. Through the group, she discovered a newfound passion for music that brings joy and a sense of accomplishment.

“I enjoy playing guitar. I enjoy learning,” said Nicole. “I never thought I’d pick up a guitar in my life. So to have that be something that I’m doing now is something that I’m really proud of... I’m really proud that I’ve been able to take Michael’s teachings and apply them like that.”

Exploring therapeutic outcomes of musical expression

McGuinty says there’s tremendous therapeutic value in expressing one’s feelings in a safe and supportive place.

“It helps them put words on paper; it helps them express themselves. They’re creating something, and they see that they have accomplished something.”

Both McGuinty and Fahey have seen remarkable transformations among the participants.

“When I first came in and started playing guitar, everyone was quiet with their heads down, but as we progressed, they all started smiling, singing, and genuinely enjoying themselves,” recalls Fahey.

“Some of the clients have come to me with things they have written and we have worked with them together shaping them into lyrics and putting a melody to them. It’s so wonderful to see their amazement and satisfaction.”

McGuinty has seen improved creativity, camaraderie, and confidence. Moreover, she believes the benefits of creative expression through music extend far beyond the sessions themselves.

“They are connecting and being vulnerable in the group, which leads to greater connection and friendship outside of the group,” she says.

“Playing music, singing and learning something new puts people in a vulnerable situation, and they are doing this with their fellow clients.”

“They have to put their trust into others – this in turn helps build connections.”

One member of the group, who had never picked up a guitar, now practices during the week. Another started out not wanting to participate but now “belts out the songs with enthusiasm,” describes McGuinty. “You can just see him coming in so bright, so happy.”

Moving towards program expansion and formal research

The guitar group is currently undergoing a feasibility study. Comeau soon hopes to have the information he needs to make this a permanent group at The Royal and launch a formal research study to find out how music-based programs like this one contribute to the recovery and wellness of this particular population.

While more data is needed to understand the impact of music on mental health, the anecdotal evidence is plentiful. For Fahey, the most rewarding part of the group was watching members come out of their shells and make music for themselves. He’s thrilled that what first started out as a basic “learn to play” group grew into a class that teaches songwriting and musical notation.

“It’s incredible to see them excited about learning to read music and playing guitar – it’s so uplifting,” he says.

Volunteer and funding needs

Comeau is grateful for volunteers like Fahey: “We couldn’t make this work without our volunteers.” Comeau would like to expand the program to other units in the Forensic Program and maybe even gift guitars to folks who learn how to play during their time in the program so they can bring the guitar with them when they are discharged. However, more volunteers and financial support are needed to make that happen.

[View a short video about the therapeutic guitar group](#) in the Forensic Program at The Royal. [Click here to listen to Forensic Blues](#), a song composed and performed by Michael Fahey and clients in the Forensic Program.

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