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# Music is Medicine: Using Art Therapy to Repair Pathways in the Brain

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Music

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## Music



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When Robert McAllister heard about the accident, he presented a resolute dissenting opinion. “Your doctors are wrong,” he told Blue. “You’ll return to work. You’ll play again.”

McAllister joined Blue’s physical therapy team, which included Board Certified Music Therapists at Cleveland’s Music Settlement School, which he ran at the time, and, working on a hunch, started by “retracing the steps,” as he put it, of clarinet performance. Over 28 grueling weeks, McAllister and Blue worked to painstakingly build up her memory of playing the clarinet, note by note, scale by scale.

The Colburn School community knows McAllister as dean of the Colburn Community School of Performing Arts, overseeing classes and instruction for nearly 2,000 students each year. “Teaching is a tremendous passion of mine,” he said, speaking from his Colburn School office on Grand Avenue in Downtown Los Angeles. “Passing on a love of music and a joy for playing is truly gratifying.”

Outside of Los Angeles, McAllister is known not only as a top performing arts education administrator -- last fall, the National Guild for Community Arts Education awarded him a 2014 Milestone Certificate of Appreciation in recognition of his 20 years of service to the field -- but also a pioneer in the field of music therapy for what he calls the reinstruction technique, the result of his painstaking work with Blue. His reinstruction technique relies on the idea of “neural plasticity,” which describes the way the brain changes how information is stored based on experience, education, or even injury. Music knowledge is not stored in a single area of the brain, McAllister said. Instead, the brain tucks away pockets of knowledge in various places. The music reinstruction approach helps stimulate the reconnection of disturbed brain cells and encourages the brain to create new pathways to the knowledge to replace more damaged pathways.

McAllister’s approach to restoring musical competence creates moments of epiphany for patients. In Blue’s case, for example, relearning the scale created new brain paths that unlocked pockets of knowledge isolated by her accident. Now, she could regain free access to that previously learned information and use it readily as she played. “At one point in her lessons, I realized we could skip an

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After seven months of lessons with McAllister, Blue regained 95 percent of her clarinet skills and played the first movement of Mozart's clarinet concerto. Shortly thereafter, she returned to work.

McAllister knew this was an important discovery. With associate professor and Board Certified Music Therapist, Louise Steele's participation, he created an overview of the reinstruction approach and process. Steele suggested sharing the preliminary document with Dr. Dale Taylor, a professor and music therapist she knew in Wisconsin who was an expert on brain function and plasticity. Taylor was enthusiastic about the process and the outcomes.

Robert McAllister receiving the 2014 Guild Milestone Award. | Photo: Courtesy of The Colburn School.

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McAllister's reinstruction method has been presented at more than 15 schools and professional conferences since 2009. The core team continues to work with new patients, developing additional case studies for review, and identifying ways to expand their work to address a broader range of injuries and health problems. Following their July 2015 presentation in Madrid for the International Conference on Learning, they presented to the Music Teachers National Association conference in San Antonio in April. Pending future presentations include the UCLArts and Healing Conference at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2017.

Of this work, McAllister is deeply passionate. Along with his administrative duties and teaching, McAllister continues to build on his reinstruction work. "This is a quest for me," he said, reflecting on the years of work he invested in the process. "I think it's going to help a lot of people."

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