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Bringing Live Music's Power to Hospital Rooms

Musicians on Call's volunteers—from local musicians to celebrities—go door-to-door in medical facilities to play for bedridden patients

By Emily Bobrow

In 1993, the great jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis came with a small band to perform for patients and workers at Manhattan's Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. The music was a brief, uplifting counterpoint to the hospital's buzzing fluorescent lights and antiseptic smells.

Michael Solomon, a music and tech entrepreneur, had helped to arrange the concert as a show of thanks to the center, which had cared for his late fiancée before her death from sarcoma. As he recalls it, the event's effect on the 60-odd cancer patients arranged in their wheelchairs around the makeshift stage was instantaneous and inspiring. He felt that he needed to bring such experiences to more patients, particularly those too ill to leave their rooms.

In 1999, together with Vivek Tiwary, a friend and fellow impresario, Mr. Solomon launched Musicians on Call, a nonprofit group that sends volunteer musicians to play in hospitals, veterans' facilities, nursing homes and hospice centers across the country.

The organization, which has offices in Nashville and New York City, now runs 74 weekly programs in 26 cities, including Atlanta, Dallas, Indianapolis, Miami and Wilmington, Del. Its volunteers—ranging from local professionals to the occasional celebrity—typically spend several hours going door-to-door in medical facilities to play a song or two to bedridden patients, the group says.

Musicians on Call says it has performed for nearly 600,000 patients, families and caregivers to date. Pharrell Williams, Kelly Clarkson, Keith Urban and Nick Jonas have all lent their talent to the cause. Most volunteers hear about the group by word-of-mouth, and many become regulars.

Live music can have a dramatic effect on an otherwise somber hospital room. "I've seen people who weren't able to really move get out of bed and start dancing," says Pete Griffin, the organization's president. "I've been in rooms with children where afterward, their parents come to me and say, 'That's the first time my daughter has smiled in three weeks.' "

When Mr. Griffin joined Musicians on Call as its president three years ago, it had programs in 15 cities. Today, the group has increased its geographic scope considerably without dramatically expanding its budget of around \$1.8 million, most of it from individual donors.

As more hospitals discover the value of music therapy, which studies show can alleviate patients' pain and anxiety, demand for volunteers is outstripping supply. To reach more people, Musicians on Call is working to create a digital platform that directly connects health-care centers with accredited musicians.

The group's mission is straightforward but powerful, says Mr. Griffin. "You might see a family that's really struggling, but when a musician comes in to play a song, you can see the entire room transform right in front of you. Once you see something like that, there's nothing that can replicate it. Music is a universal drug."

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