

Anna Odell PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

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Gift of Gratitude

AN ARTISTYEAR FELLOW OFFERS MUSIC TO SOOTHE SUFFERING, AND RECEIVES A PRICELESS PRESENT IN RETURN.

BY ANNA ODELL

As I stepped into the foyer of the handsome Old City townhouse, I was instantly greeted by a flurry of activity: a team of nurses bustling about, carrying medical equipment and supplies; the rhythmic beeping of a heart monitor; the mechanical whirr of an IV pump; the soft hum of an oxygen tank in the corner. In the center of the living room lay a man in a paper hospital gown, completely immobile and gazing peacefully at the ceiling. I had been invited into his home at the request of his wife, to play the harp for him. He loved classical music, and we all hoped that the sounds of my harp could bring him relief from his pain.

This gentleman suffered from ALS—amyotrophic lateral sclerosis—so severe that he had been immobile for the past three years. He could not speak; he communicated solely through eye movements and a special pad that he wrote on with the help of his wife. A team of caregivers surrounded him twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. As he had recently returned home for hospice care, the goal of the caretakers was to make him as comfortable as possible.

When I began playing, his eyes welled up with tears. Aided by his wife, he wrote “thank you so much” on his special notepad. It was deeply meaningful for me to be able to share an intimate musical experience with this couple. I was humbly reminded of the incredible power and depth of music, and its ability to transcend formal communication.

Throughout last year, I participated in Curtis’s ArtistYear Fellowship, a year of national service dedicated to bringing the arts to Philadelphia communities with limited access. Since the goal of my project was to incorporate music into underserved healthcare settings, I was in residence at both Thomas Jefferson University Hospital and MossRehab, a rehabilitation center in the Einstein Healthcare Network. With my trusty, hot-pink Celtic harp in tow, I played for patients recovering from strokes, amputations, spinal cord injuries, and traumatic brain injuries. I played for premature babies in the neonatal intensive care unit, and I played for people going into and coming out of major surgeries.

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Above left: Anna at work at MossRehab, where she gave frequent performances in the atrium



Above right: Anna playing for a young patient at Jefferson Hospital

Most often it was the cancer patients in Jefferson Hospital that I visited and played for. I met cancer patients at all different stages of their illness: the early shock and disbelief that follow diagnosis, the depression and anxiety that can accompany an extended hospital stay, and the quiet hope—often against the odds—that treatment will be successful. It was incredibly meaningful work, and I feel honored to have been able to touch these people’s lives.

A CUP HALF-FULL

Last winter, when Philadelphia was hit with a major snowstorm, I played for a gentleman who was suffering from late-stage stomach cancer. I finished playing, and as he looked out the window at the snow falling heavily outside, the man began to speak, telling me how deeply concerned he was for the homeless in Philadelphia who didn’t have shelter from the storm; and how fortunate he felt to have a warm place to take refuge from the freezing temperatures outside. Even with his advanced cancer, this gentleman still considered himself to be one of the luckiest people on the planet. At least he wasn’t a child with cancer, he said, or a homeless person in a blizzard. Even though he was sick, he had shelter from the storm, a kind nurse had taken him for a walk down the hallway earlier that day, and now he had—in his words—his “very own personal harpist.”

This was a man who chose to see his cup as half-full, not half-empty. Instead of focusing on his terminal cancer, he was thankful for what he did have. I remember the exact moment when he looked me directly in the eye and told me how lucky he felt. It truly put my problems in perspective and had a profound impact on me.

In day-to-day life, it’s easy to take for granted all the luxuries I’m used to: a roof over my head, clothes on my back, and loving family and friends. It’s easy to forget how fortunate we are. While we are taught to constantly strive for more and realize our own value in this world, I think it’s important to step back every now and then and appreciate the gifts we have. There is so much to be thankful for. Curtis ArtistYear has taught me many things, but above all it has given me the perspective to live my life with gratitude. After spending a year with cancer patients, I am profoundly thankful for my health, and for the luxury to spend my life how I choose: using music to spread joy and bring meaning to people’s lives. Life is a precious gift, and my time as a Curtis ArtistYear Fellow has made me appreciate it all the more. I will continue to carry the life lessons it has taught me for years to come. ◇

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Anna Odell received a bachelor’s degree in harp from Curtis in 2015 and was a Curtis ArtistYear Fellow in 2015–16. She is currently studying toward a master’s degree in harp performance at the University of Cincinnati—College-Conservatory of Music.