SCI-TECH

"Universe must have my back, fell from the sky into my lap"
PETE DAVIDSON ARIANA GRANDE

Music therapy program for geriatric delirium patients flourishing

BY STELLA DURAN GONZALEZ
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER



XIMENA SOLARZANO / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR
The Personalized Playlist Project, a Yale New Haven Hospital initiative, brings music to elderly patients experiencing delirium episodes. Since transforming from a student volunteer initiative into a nurse-led program, founders say the program is flourishing.

Walking through the Acute Care of Elders floor of the Yale New Haven Hospital, one might encounter patients tango-ing to old tunes or retired vocalists rehashing familiar repertoires. These elderly patients have had a delirium episode at least once in their life — but these musical moments are not one of them.

Based in the YNHH Saint Raphael Campus, the Personalized Playlist Project is an initiative that creates custom Spotify playlists for geriatric patients exhibiting symptoms of delirium. Inspired by the Music and Memory program, Dr. Jody Sharninghausen and Dr. Judy Li founded the program in 2022, seeking to use music to ground patients in reality. For the second September in a row, the project has expanded its initiative through the nurse-led Melodies for the Mind Month.

"You know, music is a thread that connects everybody, regardless if my student or any of the volunteers are 20 and our patients are 90," Kathleen Faherty, who co-coordinates the project, told the News in a Zoom interview. "It's the thread that connects all of us."

Faherty, a nurse clinical educator at YNHH, is co-leading the project after its transition from a student volunteer initiative to a nurse-led program. The program has been featured in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, the School of Public Health's Music, Memory, and Aging Symposium and the 2026 Annual American Geriatrics Society meeting.

Faherty and Sharninghausen said they often see elderly patients trapped in delirious episodes on their hospital floor. Symptoms of delirium typically manifest as acute states of confusion, fluctuating mental status or abnormal levels of arousal, according to Sharninghausen.

"So you could be very agitated, angry, like throwing things, or you could be just kind of out of it, like staring at a wall, not wanting to eat, not really interacting," Sharninghausen said in a Zoom interview.

Before the transition to the nurse-led Melodies for the Mind Month, Sharninghausen and Li said, they relied on student volunteers to create playlists for patients filled with popular music from the patient's adolescence and culture.

One former student volunteer, Sophia Ruser, a recent Cornell graduate and current post-graduate associate at Yale, recounted how much patients would thank her for the work she did volunteering during her summers back in New Haven.

"I vividly remember she was calling me her angel, and she was like, 'You know, God sent you to me at the perfect time,'" Ruser said in a Zoom interview, referring to a patient she worked with.

As of 2025, the initiative has been adopted by the nursing faculty, with Faherty serving as the nurse clinical educator leading the transition. After learning about the program through a chance encounter in the floor's hallways, Faherty reached out to Sharninghausen and Li to ask how she could support their work. Faherty thus dedicated the following September as Melodies for the Mind Month. As nurses began seeing the therapeutic effects of playing these playlists for patients, nurses continued their efforts even after the month ended.

Improving quality of care for delirium patients has lagged due to underdiagnosis and ambiguous presentation of delirium itself. A 2023 review published in the Delirium Journal found considerable under-documentation of delirium in healthcare systems internationally. One study reported a missed delirium rate of up to 84 percent.

Delirium is occasionally misdiagnosed as depression, says Sharninghausen. Patients who experience delirious episodes are at a greater risk of developing dementia, so improper documentation of these episodes can lead to the recording of incomplete past medical histories. Instead of physical restraints or antipsychotic medication, personalized playlists can be used to calm patients, especially since restraining patients can delay their discharge.

Now, as they celebrate Melodies for the Mind Month's one year anniversary, Faherty and Sharninghausen are seeking to raise awareness for delirium in geriatric patients and expand the project to other floors of the hospital and nearby nursing homes.

The YNHH Saint Raphael Campus is located at 1450 Chapel St.

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Cushing Center curator aims to make history of medicine accessible

BY KOREN MAHMOODI AND COLTON LIPSEY
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The Cushing Center at Yale, a museum located in the University's medical library, welcomed Deborah Streahle GRD '24 this summer as its inaugural curator.

The center, which is dedicated to the life and work of prominent neurosurgeon and former Yale professor Harvey Cushing, opened in 2010. It is located on the lower level of the Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library and houses hundreds of early-20th century brain and tumor specimens in Cushing's registry. Although similar roles have existed in the past, Streahle is considered the center's first formal curator.

In her role, Streahle is responsible for providing guided tours, developing exhibitions and stewarding the 10,000 photographs, historical notes and roughly 750 wet brain and tumor specimens of the collection.

"We are delighted that Dr. Streahle is joining us and bringing her deep training in the history of medicine, along with experience in teaching, public humanities, and curation," Melisa Grafe, the Head of the Historical Medical Library, wrote in an email to the News.

Streahle is a historian and curator whose research focuses on end of life care and health activism, particularly in the twentieth century. She earned a B.A. degree in philosophy from Lehigh University and a Ph.D. from Yale in the History of Science and Medicine.

In recent years, Streahle has taught courses in the History of Science, Medicine, and Public Health department at Yale, including "The Good Death: a History," and "Healing Spaces in U.S. History." In addition, she is a member of the Life Worth Living initiative, part of the Yale Center for Culture and Faith and a lecturer for the Yale Young Global Scholars Program.

Her dissertation, "Care Underground: Activists and the Transformation of American Dying in the 1960s," discusses how the 1960s was a turning point for end-of-life and post mortem care in the U.S. She analyzed grassroots efforts to provide more community based, personalized care and compared death care during the Vietnam War with mainstream death care in the late 1960s.

As a doctoral candidate, she curated five exhibits using materials from library collections — including a pop-up exhibit at the Yale medical library — on the lived experience of people with disabilities across cultures.

Streahle wrote in an email that through the Cushing Center, she hopes "to invite people to connect with histories of health and think about how medicine is practiced and remembered."

She said that this role aligns with her goals as a public historian and sees "many exciting possibilities for exhibitions" on a wide range of topics, from medical photography to nursing.

Streahle added that she intends to create exhibits that act like a "living space for reflection, learning, and commemoration." She hopes for the space to be accessible to both medical and lay visitors and help them connect ideas in medicine with those in art, history, ethics and humanities.

Holly Grossetta Nardini, the Interim Director of the Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library, where the Cushing Center is housed, said that she is excited to see Streahle's leadership and the ways in which she will "capture the astonishing history of neurosurgery, patient care, and medical innovation."

Terry Dagradi had been working on collections before the Cushing Center's founding, as a photographer, since 1996. Dagradi, who recently retired from a role in which she coordinated and curated the Cushing Center, said she is excited to see how Streahle's previous work which shaped her "sensitivity to dealing with death and honoring people" helps her steward the center.

Dagradi said she believes that one of the primary goals of the Cushing Center moving forward is to understand "why things were done the way they were done" throughout the history of medicine.

She added that she hopes that the Cushing Center's exhibits tackle hard topics, including those around patients' rights, and that the Center will continue to create wonder and help people "leave with more questions than when they came in."

"I always imagined it would be so wonderful to be able to stand in front of one of the tumors, that says, you know, this is a glioblastoma, or this is a meningioma or this is an astroblastoma," Dagradi said. "And, maybe with a QR code, you click on that and some neurosurgeon will then explain to you."

The Harvey Cushing/John Hay Whitney Medical Library is located at 333 Cedar St.



JIYOO NAM / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Deborah Streahle GRD '24, a historian who has studied end-of-life care over time, said she hopes to transform the center — which contains centuries-old brain specimens — into a living space for learning and commemoration.

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