

POWER DRUM SONG

MILITARY MEMBERS FIND RHYTHM IN A DRUM CIRCLE

BY JACKIE SAUNDERS

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ilitary life is stressful. Deployment, long periods of separation from family, and adjusting upon return to civilian life, are all concerns that are unique to members of the military

and the people who patiently wait for them. Music therapists are finding ways to help these families make connections, communicate, and have a good time with their fellow coworkers in the armed forces.

Tiffany Wyndham, music therapist and director of development and communications for Resounding Joy, a nonprofit organization that promotes emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual well-being through supportive music, uses drum circles to help soldiers around Southern California. Her friendship with a retired Marine who served in Desert Storm is one reason that this type of music therapy is important to Wyndham. "Through this deep friendship I came to realize how important it was to support members of our military in any way possible," says Wyndham. "As music is a powerful modality, I and others like me, can use our training to support members of the military through the use of music in various therapeutic ways."

In September of 2008, Wyndham and other drum circle facilitators with Resounding Joy were invited to lead drum

circles at the Marine Corps Base Camp Pendleton, in San Diego County.

The drum circles were held during the base's 4th Annual Patriotic Rally Barbecue and Car Show. Resounding Joy facilitators worked with marines in the School of Infantry who had just completed basic training.

"Drums are very powerful instruments," says Wyndham. "A drum circle can be likened to the way marines work and understand each other in the field. Working as a team and communicating, sometimes nonverbally, make drum circles a natural fit for these marines. The drums are also very masculine, rhythmical, and primal in a lot of ways."

Besides providing a platform for illustrating teamwork and camaraderie, Wyndham says research shows that drumming



and music actually provide a stimulant for endorphin release, which is a natural pain killer. The Gate Control Theory of Pain, which suggests a person cannot actively think about pain while engaged in another activity, is one reason Wyndham believes drum circles also help military members who are dealing with an injury.

"When you tap on a surface and make music with a drum, you are interrupting or slowing those pain signals," she says.

During the barbecue, almost 3,000 marines filtered in and out of the 20- to 25-minute drum circle slots. "The drumming was so powerful, you could hear it across the parking lot," says Wyndham. She observed a noticeable difference in the actions and emotions of the people in the drum circle. Drummers became more aware of each other, appreciating the unique sound. There was increased eye contact and evidence of improved self-esteem among the marines. Some got up and danced, embraced each other, laughed, and shouted.

"People in the military are trained not to express emotions in their work, which is stress inducing," says Wyndham. "In a drum circle, their emotions can be expressed in a safe environment through drumming, which is a great release."

Wyndham likes to use a variety of drums with different tones, timbres, and sounds. The drum circles at Camp Pendleton featured bass drums, djembés, tubanos, Native American drums, and small hand percussion instruments like maracas, claves, and bells. Facilitators often use a cowbell to cut through the sounds of the other percussion instruments and maintain the beat.

Resounding Joy is seeking more opportunities to work with military members and their families. "The experience with the School of Infantry, organized by the Carlsbad Chamber of Commerce, simply solidified my resolve to continue to pursue this type of outreach," says Wyndham.

One music therapist who has worked with military families with young children is American Music Therapy Association (AMTA) Consultant Barbara Else. She received a grant from AMTA and from music products association NAMM to work with military families at the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson, Arizona. Else facilitated drum circles for families where one parent was deploying, redeploying, or returning from active duty.

"Lots of these families already have a sense of what to anticipate, but they never get used to it," says Else. "It's stressful for every deployment, from the most experienced families to the

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very young families on their first deployment. Drum circles provide tools and an outlet other than talk-based briefings to deal with the emotions."

Else wanted to work with military families because she, along with her music therapy colleagues, observed a growing need for coping mechanisms during these transitional periods.

"The military offers lots of good information and resources for the family members, but nobody that we found has done a program using music therapy, music, and creative arts," says Else.

During the drum circles, a lot of military families weren't sure of what to expect. By the time they walked out of the door, Else says she saw a shift in their attitudes. Families were communicating more and said they wanted to return.

"One of the great things about drum circles is that they are accessible to individuals of all ages and anyone can participate or lead," says Else. "A six-year-old of a parent returning from deployment can lead and then can shift roles so the returning parent leads. The drumming gives them a context for discussion about issues of transition and how to cope."

Major themes of drum circles for military personnel are increased communication and bonding. Because teamwork is essential to being a soldier, drum circles are effective tools to facilitate these group relationships.

"It motivates them and enhances group cohesion," explains Wyndham. "You don't need language. Music is the universal language."

