

Holistic MD takes a musical path to healing

September 20, 2010

Story by Anne Biggs for *Bucks County Woman*

Your medical doctor comes into her waiting room, settles herself at the piano, and begins to play a soaring and enchanting song that soothes you deeper into your chair and causes a tingle to run up the back of your neck.

No, this is not your average doctor appointment. It isn't even the usual treatment dispensed by holistic practitioner Deborah Bernstein, MD, in her Lahaska office. But for several months this spring, it was a way for Debbie Bernstein the pianist to practice the piece she had composed and would be performing with the Central Bucks West High School Chamber Choir on May 27. And her patients loved it.



“Cherish Our Earth,” music and lyrics by Deborah Bernstein, grew out of the composer’s deep desire to bring people together to heal the environment.

“We have this planet in common,” she explains, “and we’ve come to a point where we need to be there, as a people, for the Earth.” She wrote the piece a year or more ago, and then “just felt the need to put lyrics to it.” An improvisational musician, Bernstein typically allows a composition to be a free-flowing collaboration between her musical instincts and the musical instrument, building on it each time she plays it. Except for the addition of lyrics, “Cherish Our Earth” was no different, initially.

However, what began as a wish to share something special with her older daughter, Jennifer, in her final year of high school quickly took Bernstein down a path she had not quite anticipated. Because Jen sang in Dr. Joseph Ohrt’s Chamber Choir at Central Bucks West, Bernstein was aware that Ohrt believed in exposing his students to different composers and a variety of music.

“I approached him with the idea of using ‘Cherish Our Earth’ in the spring concert,” she recalls. “I played it for him. He asked if I’d written it down and if it had four-part harmony.” She hadn’t, of course. “So I took a while to do that, and I presented it to him.

Dr. Ohrt was kind enough to make some changes that he felt would make it sound better for the choir, and he put me in the concert.

“It was somewhat unexpected and miraculous,” she says, her surprise still apparent weeks after the successful and well-received musical performance.

The healing path of medicine

When it came to her career in medicine, Bernstein, who lives in Doylestown with her husband, Paul Weinstein, and daughters, Jennifer and Stephanie Weinstein, knew she was interested in a more natural approach. Searching for the best route to communicate that, she earned a Master’s degree in Bio-Nutrition and became board-certified in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

“My dad had early-on health conditions. His attitude and how he took on changes to improve his health inspired me,” she says of her earliest influences. “At the time, Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation was more holistically oriented [than other choices I could have made]. I felt the MD would give me more credibility and enable me to affect people in a more meaningful way.”

Bernstein is dedicated to seeking the root cause of her patient’s health issues, a course she considers one of her strengths. “Rather than looking at a problem in isolation, I try to look at the whole picture and get to the underlying cause. Then I’ll suggest changes in diet, lifestyle, exercise; nutritional and herbal supplementation; stress management techniques; or homeopathic treatments...as well as referring patients to specialists I respect who provide energy work, counseling, chiropractic, massage and more.”

She believes in what her father demonstrated: people can make changes that improve their health and quality of life. Her “ideal patients” are those who are “motivated to help themselves, interested in treating conditions from a natural perspective, and willing to make lifestyle changes that will benefit their health and well-being.”

The healing path of music

As a child, Bernstein took piano lessons. “But I was always much more oriented to playing by ear, which made lessons challenging. ‘That’s very nice, but it’s not on the page,’ my teacher would say. So my sight reading is not great.

“I started composing probably in my early teens, and I played and sang at that time.” She played much less in college, but picked it up again when in medical school. Right after med school, around 1989, she recorded her first album. Her husband has written a couple of plays, for which she wrote all the music, and these were performed at Buckingham Friends School. The family-oriented fare, with parts for children and adults, was a nice way to combine their talents.

With a range of musical styles that interest her, Bernstein mentions only one dislike: “nothing discordant. I like beauty in general, nature, my gardens, Ravel, Debussy, the

Impressionists, Rachmaninoff, Dvořák, Big Bands, classical and some New Age, gospel, music that moves people.”

Her uplifting, anthem-like compositions and interpretations of others’ pieces express the poignancy, hope and joy that she feels in her own life experiences. “Sometimes it just comes through me,” she says. “I’ll sit at the piano and totally improvise; I may never play it again that way.”

Whenever there is a piano in the room, people who know Bernstein tend to expect an impromptu performance. “It’s a means of communication, of sharing, that I enjoy,” she says. She loves to play for her patients: for one who was unable to get to church, she played an uplifting, lyrical improvisation of “Amazing Grace” on Sunday mornings.

Joining the healing paths

“My commitment to the environment is related to my practice of medicine. Insults to our environment directly impact our food supply and our health and well-being. Sustainable farming practices, organic produce, grass-fed and free-range animals raised humanely are all better for the environment and at the same time much healthier for us to consume.

“I just wish I had more time to get my music out to others. It is a powerful, inspiring tool to move people on important issues. It’s not just the environmental cause; it’s working together for something bigger than ourselves.”

So let’s all take a stand to remember
That we all are together and are one
That our planet is our most precious resource and
It’s here where we all started from
—from “Cherish Our Earth,” music and lyrics © 2010 Deborah Bernstein

If you are interested in Deborah Bernstein performing “Cherish Our Earth” for your related cause or initiative, please call her at her office, 215.794.7880
