

Featured Center Director: Mary Schaefer



Music Together teacher and director Mary Schaefer firmly believes that music learning supports all learning. She is certain that the Music Together classes at Playing with Music, her center in Salinas, California, provide a rich environment not only for children's music learning but also for the development of their cognitive, verbal, and social skills. But Mary never expected to discover how profoundly Music Together's songs and activities would help her after she suffered a traumatic brain injury.

On December 20, 2008, Mary accidentally ran a stop sign and collided with a truck. She spent three days in the hospital, where she was treated for a serious head injury and a broken wrist, and then returned home with no memory of the event. For months, Mary struggled to recall simple words and would ask the same questions over and over again, which she describes as a "short memory loop." With the help of her children Veronica and Cameron, now ages 19 and 20, Mary began the slow and painful process of recovery. Through it all, the one great comfort she had was music. Although she fought to make sense of words, there was one thing she could still do amazingly well. Mary could sing!

"Thinking and getting my words out was like wading through Jell-O," Mary explains. "The harder I pushed to find a word, the more I spiraled downward into depression and fear. And yet I could sing just fine! Singing helped me to re-wire my brain—and it brought my words back. That is such a powerful testimony to the healing effects of music on our brains, not to mention on our hearts and souls."

Mary's use of music in her recovery is an example of the significant role that music can play in brain-injury treatment. From stroke patients to injured people like Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, music therapy has purportedly helped many who have lost cognitive or physical ability. According to Music Together LLC Program Developer and board-certified music therapist Carol Ann Blank, "Participating in music experiences activates many parts of the brain at once, which could help to form new neural pathways in the injured brain."

Despite her broken arm and slowed speech, Mary was back teaching Music Together within three weeks of her accident. While her quick return may seem surprising, she really did it out of necessity: with no health insurance, making music with her families was the only "therapy" she could afford. Remarkably, Mary could still remember all the words and actions to the songs, as long as she was singing.

"In Music Together, I've learned that active music-making helps children develop neural pathways," says Mary. "I can't tell you specifically how or why it helped my adult brain injury. I just know that I couldn't find my words when I was talking, but I could remember my Music Together songs and I could lead a class. I have a classroom

assistant named Barbara, and she told me that she knew I was going to be okay when I started doing sophisticated rhythm patterns again!"

Today, Mary is back teaching all of her classes and is able to speak with ease once again. Last fall, along with Cameron and Veronica, she joined the Monterey Peninsula Choral Society, a 113-member community chorus. The group is one of only six United States choirs who were invited to perform at the 2012 London Olympic Games. This past week, Mary and Cameron travelled to Europe with the chorus, where they performed at several venues in Paris and London, including Disneyland Paris, Westminster Abbey, and the Canterbury Cathedral. The tour culminated with a performance at the "London Live!" concert on the Olympic Park main stage for an audience of 30,000 people. Mary was thrilled to have this experience, and she was especially happy to share it with her son.

"Music has always been a part of our family's life, but this is Cameron's first choral experience and he really likes it," says Mary proudly. "I am so blessed to have music in my life and to be able to share my love of music with so many people. Singing is so powerful and so healing, and I hope I can help people understand that."

—Kate Battenfeld, *Music Together* contributing writer

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