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April 20, 1990
018-1990

Laurier to host national conference on music therapy

Music therapy, still pioneering for full acceptance as a professional discipline, is the subject of a national conference to be held at Wilfrid Laurier University May 10 to 12.

The 17th annual conference of the Canadian Association for Music Therapy, entitled Catalyst for Change, will draw more than 100 registrants from the field of music therapy, related therapies and the medical profession.

About 25 music therapists from North America will make presentations on the application of music therapy in palliative care and grief counselling and as a therapeutic intervention for people with AIDS, cancer, Alzheimer's disease, head injuries, autism and other disabilities.

There will also be panel discussions with representatives from the other avant-garde therapies -- drama, dance and the visual arts -- and the more traditional ones such as speech and occupational therapy.

Dr. Rosemary Fischer, conference chairperson and director of the music therapy program at Laurier, said participants will also bring to the conference their ongoing struggle to better

establish the integrity of music therapy as a discipline with both the medical profession and the public at large.

"In our discipline, music is the catalyst for change," she said. "We hope the conference itself can serve as a catalyst for change in terms of our professional identity in the 1990s."

While all music therapists can tell of the breakthroughs that this discipline has meant in the lives of their clients, they face obstacles in securing full acceptance for the therapy.

Fischer said there is a common misconception about music therapy. "It's not just 'Let's sing a song. That feels good.'"

The discipline uses music as a tool to achieve specific goals in the cognitive, emotional and physical domains. These goals are determined through assessment and implemented after careful treatment planning.

Music therapy can, for example, help establish contact with a patient who has Alzheimer's disease, bring an autistic child out of his or her shell, or assist a person with a head injury to regain speech more quickly.

As one of only three Canadian institutions that offer training programs for music therapists, Laurier is helping the therapy stake its claim. The requirements of Laurier's four-year degree program, established in 1986, include the completion of four practica and a six-month internship upon graduation.

A music therapy clinic on campus gives students additional experience. It treats both children and adults with a variety of disabilities, including head injuries and Alzheimer's disease.