

Music Students Play to Inspire Senior Citizens

PARTNERSHIP WITH CHELMSFORD SENIOR CENTER BRINGS MUSIC TO COMMUNITY



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By David Perry

“Shake ‘em if you got ‘em!”

Savannah Marshall ‘13, ‘16 stood among 12 student musicians and barked commands at senior citizens armed with shakers, cowbells and tambourines.

Students from lecturer Savannah Marshall's Progressive Performance and Production Pedagogy class perform a semester-ending concert at the Chelmsford Senior Center.

As sophomore music major Alex Jones sang his way through a rocking rendition of “Twist and Shout,” the crowd listened, tentatively at first. In the large functional hall of the Chelmsford Senior Center, there were amplifiers and electric keyboards. Drums and background vocals.

A half-hour later, sophomore Joe Folan sang Johnny Cash’s

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“Ring of Fire” and things ignited. Those who could shook their instruments and bodies.

“This is great,” said 92-year-old Al Slidel. He stepped up to one of the microphones to sing along with a couple of numbers. “The kids are great; the music is great.”

It was the final day of Marshall’s Progressive Performance and Production Pedagogy class, her first foray as a lecturer in the [Music Department \(uml.edu/FAHSS/music/default.aspx\)](http://uml.edu/FAHSS/music/default.aspx). The pink-haired drummer has long been an energetic mainstay of the department as a student and as a Lowell musician. Since earning her master’s a year ago, she is on the other side of the grade book.

Her students used popular songs, instruments and performances to learn about teaching music. They also learned about music's potential to connect all people. The connection between Marshall's class and the seniors came about when the senior center reached out to the Music Department.



A Chelmsford Senior Center member shakes along with the music during a performance by UMass Lowell students.

"We'd had a partnership with the school's physical therapy people, and wanted to do something with music," said April Hunt, who helps with the center's health and wellness program. "I know the university has a really good music program. So we thought, why don't we get the seniors some music? We called and this happened, and it has just been amazing."

Marshall's goal was to entertain the senior citizens while teaching her students how to work under any circumstances. So the overture from the senior center provided a perfect opportunity.

The class "fills a need," said Marshall. "We don't always teach music students the things they necessarily want to be learning. These kids have to learn their craft, but they also have to know how to go out into the world and use it. It's about educating students in a way where we meet them where they are."



In the end, she says, "the idea is to make everyone dance and have fun."

"Every single person in the room has been involved," said Debra Siriani, human services director for Chelmsford's Council on Aging and Senior Center Director. "Music is like that — it keeps us alive, young and old. These kids are wonderful. We all love it, but when you're older and unable to do as much physically, it's especially important."

Music students learn about teaching music during their performance at the Chelmsford Senior Center.

In a pair of previous visits, Marshall led the class and the seniors through "a Jeopardy-like game" and worked on percussive skills, including a drum circle. On the third visit, they worked from a setlist determined by seniors' votes. It included "You Are My Sunshine," "This Land is Your Land" and Harry Belafonte's hit, "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)," as well as "Hound Dog."

The students handed out lyric sheets so the seniors could sing along.

One song didn't require help: "God Bless America." People stood and some slipped their hands over their hearts. Halfway through, a man in the middle of the room wiped his eyes.

"Some people here are a little shy or a little awkward, and there are some here who even have a touch of dementia," said Hunt. "But music brings back memories for all of them as well as encouraging socialization. When they play the instruments, it all goes away."



Photo by Ed Brennen

Marshall started the session with some stretching. They extended their arms and rotated them in a circular motion and then stretched their legs.

Nancy Grippo, who volunteers at the center helping people prepare their taxes, said the music students made a mark.

"It makes people very happy. We've never had anything like it here before," she said. "It makes me happy for the whole day."

As the last notes of Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" still hung in the air, Marshall had a notion.

"I think we're ready for the road," she said. "Shall we?"

Lecturer Savannah Marshall leads the sing-along during her class's performance at the Chelmsford Senior Center.

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