

Houston Music and Wellness Center

Cindy St. Cyr
713-464-SING (7464)
www.cindystcyr.com
www.musicwellnesscenter.com



HealthRHYTHMS Publish Research Summary

Rainbows of Rhythm

Rebuilding After the Storm of Columbine

By: Christine K. Stevens, MSW, M.A., MT-BC

I've always found it interesting that after a tragedy occurs, we often honor those who've died with a moment of silence. I wonder if this practice reflects our societal problem in talking about grief and loss. Although research has shown that telling one's story is essential in healing from trauma, the sadness is often so horrific, many are left speechless. Words cannot express the experience and emotions that accompany trauma. That is where music plays an essential role in healing after events such as the Columbine High School shooting.

On April 20, 1999, many students, parents and family members were speaking on the air through the local AM radio station. In the midst of the fog of unknowns as the death count was being determined, and the shock of the Columbine high school shooting was sinking in, emotions were raw and people needed an outlet. This initial rush of verbal processing was short lived.

Days later, when the death count was known and nearby Clement Park began to house a growing memorial wall of flowers and poems, the Littleton community seemed to fall silent. Those resistant to addressing the issue were driven even more into the silence by the daily hounding of the media at the school and the park.

At this time, music found its way into the grief process on a large scale. Two high school students wrote the song, "Columbine Friend of Mine." They recorded the song and made it available on the web. They performed it at the memorial and later in Washington D.C. at a hearing on school violence. Their song contained the speechless emotions of so many students, children, and parents felt deep in their hearts.

Although a request for a drum circle had arrived immediately following the shooting, I advised against it. The sound of the drums so soon after the shooting would be counter-therapeutic, potentially triggering the auditory memory of the gunshots heard in the school that day. Instead, music therapy services were provided by the American Music Therapy Association and many music products companies who co-sponsored the "Music for Littleton" project, directed by Brenda Luksch. It was still a challenge to reach the students. People didn't want to talk about it. They wanted to be left alone.

One year later, an opportunity arose to bring music into the healing of the Littleton community. As part of the one-year anniversary memorial event, we were asked by the peace organization, TRACE to hold a community drum circle in Clement Park. Now far enough removed from the actual shooting, it was the perfect use of community music making for emotional expression and relationship repairing.

The event included a closed memorial service for the Columbine students followed by an open day in the park with peers and family. I immediately enlisted the help of my friends and colleagues Bob Anzlovar, a Denver drum circle facilitator, Bob Rupp, owner of the Denver based store, Rupp's Drums, and Rami Liddle, a community change agent and asset-builder in Colorado who helped organize the event.

We established the purpose of the drum circle as four-fold:

1. To offer a non-verbal modality for emotional expression.
2. To rebuild connections between community members and within families through working together musically.
3. To increase the morale of the community and re-establish hope.
4. To practice through the music experience, the skills needed in rebuilding the community.

We listed six skills we felt were needed to reach this goal:

1. Listening
2. Contributing
3. Respecting
4. Appreciating
5. Being
6. Connecting

We came to think of the drum circle as rainbow-building after the flood.

We chose the instruments wisely, bringing REMO tubanos specially for their more contained, softer tones and supplementing them with many sustaining ambient sounds such as rainsticks, ocean drums, chimes, gongs, and bells. We brought a Brazilian bass drum, the surdo to sound out the deep heartbeat rhythm that underlined the grooves of the day.

In an effort to explain the purpose of the drum circle, we created a bookmark which also listed

the six skills for community building practiced through drumming. It read:

HonorRhythms: Honoring the Pulse of Community

We offer this drum circle to energize the community with the powerful rhythms of growth and change, resounding in the hearts and souls of all those wanting to remember, heal, and create a better community.

In the silence we honor and remember those taken from the community. In the sound we raise our voices against it ever happening again. As we drum together, we are being the change we want to create.

Please join your community in:

- * Listening. Using your ear drum, the most important instrument in the drum circle.
- * Contributing. Becoming creative. Adding your ideas to the song.
- * Respecting. Playing the instruments, never hitting them.
- * Appreciating. Noticing someone's playing and letting them know you like it.
- * Being. Removing our masks and being real with one another.
- * Connecting. Building relationships within the circle.

We spent the entire day at Clement Park. Our approach was primarily improvisational. Bob and other drumming volunteers maintained a steady groove while we awaited those who were called by the music to come and develop new rhythms with us. What we witnessed was testimony to what can happen using music.

Parents and children came to our drum circle silent, apprehensive and disconnected. At first it was difficult to even maintain eye contact. Knowing words could never communicate what each of us felt that day, we slowly began drumming together. The sadness we shared was overwhelming at first. For some, the tears flowed continually, dampening their hands and instruments. Yet as we drummed, renewed support for each other and a collective sense of hope gradually replaced our despair.

Our experience was more than therapeutic- it connected us on many levels. You could see the repairing of parent-child relationships through the shared act of making music together. One mother commented afterwards that it was the first time she and her daughter had done something beautiful and expressive together since the shooting. Even as the tears continued to run down her face, I could see she was smiling.

At the end of the day, as we packed the drums and headed to the evening memorial, we all fell silent. Without our drums, there was nothing more to say.

What lingered on was the quiet knowing that music had served this community today and a deep sense of feeling fortunate to have played a part in that process.

Copyright © 2000 Christine Stevens

<https://remo.com/experience/post/rainbows-of-rhythm-rebuilding-after-the-storm-of-c/>