Students majoring in music therapy volunteer with community organizations throughout their college careers, assisting individuals and groups ranging from infants to senior citizens.

**BY MARY SHANNON WELLS | PHOTOS BY ELLEN JOHNSON, DYSN NEEB AND JESSI SIMMONS**

**S**ervice learning is not just a component of The University of Alabama’s music-therapy program; it’s a core principle of the curriculum.

The music-therapy program at UA is an intensive, four-year undergraduate process, plus a six-month internship. Students are involved in service learning through numerous courses.

“I came into college not knowing what I wanted to do,” says Jordan Bailey, a senior from Tuscaloosa majoring in music therapy. “Participating in the music-therapy program has made me excited for my future. I feel very prepared and ready to become a music therapist.”

But what exactly is music therapy?

“Music therapy is the clinical practice of using music to address non-music objectives,” says Dr. Ellary Draper, an assistant professor of music therapy.

People who receive music therapy services often have learning disabilities, autism-spectrum disorders, intellectual and developmental disabilities, cerebral palsy, Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, psychiatric disorders or addictions. Hospital and hospice patients and residents of nursing homes and assisted-living facilities also benefit from music therapy. Music therapists set patient goals, which might be physical, emotional or psychological, depending on the individual’s needs. Therapists then use music to cue behavior such as playing an instrument to develop fine motor skills, dancing to improve range of motion or writing a song to exercise cognitive abilities.

Students in UA’s music-therapy program volunteer with approximately 20 community organizations, providing therapy in a variety of settings. Community partners include Brewer Porch Children’s Center, Sprayberry Education Center, Crossing Points, North Harbor psychiatric facility, Druid City Hospital Regional Medical Center, Capstone Village and Hospice of West Alabama.

To become board-certified music therapists, all students gain experience working with children, adults in medical settings and older adults. Each student also works in a psychiatric setting to practice counseling skills.

Every undergraduate student completes at least 180 service hours. Annually, UA students majoring in music therapy devote a total of approximately 1,700 hours to conducting therapy sessions in communities across West Alabama. Through a six-month internship, each student also completes a minimum of 1,020 service hours at a single site. Most students work 40 hours per week during the internship.

“We appreciate and value the long-term collaboration we have with the agencies in the Tuscaloosa area,” says Dr. Andrea Cevasco-Trotter, associate professor of music therapy and director of UA’s music-therapy program. “It is only through these collaborations that students have the opportunity to apply what they have learned in the classroom to the clinical setting. It is often when students start their clinical work in the community that they truly understand the power of music to create positive changes in the people we serve.”

The following courses incorporate service learning.

**MUS 182 Observation and Orientation to Music Therapy**

Second-semester freshmen enroll in MUS 182 Observation and Orientation to Music Therapy. As part of the class, they conduct weekly, 30-minute therapy sessions with kids at Brewer Porch Children’s Center.

MUS 182 students and Dr. Draper review the children’s Individualized Education Plans and base their music-therapy activities around the needs and objectives of each child.

“These kids, particularly in the residential programs, have pretty significant histories of abuse and neglect and lack of educational opportunities, lack of social opportunities,” says Dr. Ross Grimes, clinical director at Brewer Porch. “It’s another chance to engage with them and give them connections with people and show them they can be good at something.

“It’s nice to see kids excited about going to music therapy. I think many of them see it as a reward when it’s really a critical component of the treatment program as a whole, and that’s the engagement we want to see.”

**MUS 282 Music Therapy Practicum**

In MUS 282, sophomore music-therapy students hold weekly, 30-minute sessions at Caring Days Adult Day Care, which provides programs for adults with Alzheimer’s and other memory disorders. Each student leads one or two songs or other music-therapy activities. When they’re not leading the group, students sing and dance with individual participants. Oftentimes, the students play songs that were popular when the Caring Days clients were teenagers.

“Most people go into Caring Days thinking, ‘It’s going to be older people; they’re going to be grumpy.’ But when we walked in the first day, they were all applauding,” says Ashlyn Riley, a music-therapy-equivalency student from...
Summerville, Ala. Riley has earned a degree in music and is now completing the music-therapy program. “Every single session, they come up and hug me, and they thank me so much for being there,” Riley says.

MUS 282 students also are paired with juniors or seniors enrolled in MUS 382 and assist those students in their service-learning placements.

MUS 382 Music Therapy Practicum
Juniors and seniors enrolled in MUS 382 work with two or three different community partners over each semester. Most music-therapy sessions last 45 to 60 minutes, and every student spends approximately two hours per week conducting sessions. At schools and hospitals, students often visit multiple classes and patient rooms during a single visit. Students prepare, implement and document all music-therapy services provided, just like licensed music therapists do. They also perform demos and presentations in class, turn in session evaluation reports and complete additional class assignments.

“It’s identical pretty much to what we will be doing in professional careers as music therapists because the professors structure it to where we have to submit any data we take 24 hours after a session is done, just like you would in the real world,” says Autumn Williams, a senior from Selma, Ala., majoring in music therapy.

Williams is president of the student-run Capstone Music Therapy Association. The CMTA leads additional community outreach programs and hosts events in which students share ideas for music-therapy sessions.

MUS 382 juniors and seniors take the course every semester, with new placements each time. The program aims to give them experience across as many settings as possible so they can decide what types of patients they would like to work with during their six-month internships and their careers.

“Ultimately, what you want the students to be able to do is find a population that they’re passionate about,” says Charlie Seaman, director of music therapy clinical field education at UA.

Bailey says he’s developed skills needed to be flexible and versatile.

“This semester, I am working in the oncology unit at DCH Hospital,” he says. “I help the patients by distracting them from pain, providing them with relaxation, facilitating socialization, elevating their mood and much more,” Bailey says. “I also work with children at the UA Speech and Hearing Center this semester. We focus on academic skills, social skills and motor skills.”

Many students enroll in music therapy to combine medical interests with a love for music. Both Riley and Williams began music therapy courses for this reason.

“I was interested in doing music because I’m a violist, and I was also very interested in working in the medical field,” Williams says. “I was looking for a way to pursue both of those in college, and when I learned about music therapy, I thought, ‘That’d be the perfect fit.’”

Williams sees herself working in a hospital. “Once I gain some experience, I want to do presentations in Alabama hospitals to show them how their patients would benefit from music therapy,” she says.

For more information about the music-therapy program, contact Dr. Ellary Draper at 205-348-1432 or eadraper@ua.edu or Dr. Andrea Cevasco-Trotter at amtrotter@ua.edu or 205-348-7804.