

Alzheimer Society's iPod Project offers music to soothe troubled souls

Toronto project aims to donate 10,000 iPods to stir happy memories for dementia patients.



LUCAS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR

Domenica Bianchi listens to music from the 1930s on her iPod outside of the Harold and Grace Baker Centre in Toronto. The Alzheimer's Society of Toronto plans to distribute 10,000 iPods to people living with dementia in an effort to calm the affects of the condition.

By: Jane Gerster Staff Reporter, Published on Sun Jul 21 2013

Every day, Angela Bianchi visits her aunt at a long-term care facility, wheels her out of her room, and helps her switch between songs and adjust the volume on her blue iPod Shuffle.

When the music's on, 93-year-old Domenica Bianchi visibly relaxes.

The senior, who came to Canada more than four decades ago and was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease three years ago, slouches forward in her wheelchair with her eyes mostly closed and listens to songs from her youth in Italy.

It's a far cry from three years ago, Bianchi said, when her aunt "went delirious."

"All of a sudden she gets up and she doesn't recognize you, she doesn't know what house she's in," Bianchi said.

Bianchi said she must use cues to remind her aunt who she is: "I'm your sister's daughter . . . no, the other daughter."

But the music has eased Domenica's agitated state. With her headphones on and just the faintest of prodding, her aunt will raise her head and sing a few lines of *Quanto sei bella Roma*, a popular Italian song, from memory.

Domenica Bianchi received the iPod, headphones and a \$100 gift card for iTunes a few months ago

from the Alzheimer Society of Toronto.

A volunteer helped Bianchi load up the iPod with songs Domenica would like, and for the past few months, Bianchi has watched her aunt relax to the music, with no medication needed.

“That's the point,” she said. “You want her to relax in a natural way.”

The Society launched the iPod Project last December, and even though it has delivered only 200 iPods so far, the organization plans to ramp up donation efforts this fall. Its three-year goal is 10,000.

The Toronto program is modelled after Music and Memory, a non-profit based in New York that delivers personally loaded mp3 players to people. The Alzheimer Society of Toronto worked closely with Music and Memory to develop its own program, according to Scott Russell, director of community engagement.

He said interest in the project initially came from a YouTube video that went viral last summer. In it, an elderly man named Henry who has dementia sits mostly inert and unresponsive. But when he hears music from his generation, his eyes light up and he starts to shake his head and move his arms like he's dancing.

In Toronto, Russell said he's seen similar results. “There was a lady who was absolutely resistant to the idea,” he said. “She wasn't really into it, wasn't really there, but she listens to the music and at one point breaks down in tears, it makes her so happy.”

It can't be just any music, though, and Lee Bartel, a professor in music education and association dean of research at the University of Toronto, said the choice of music is crucial.

Music specific to someone's teenage years resonates deeply in their brains, Bartel said, even if it's not as powerful or as vibrant as when they were young.

Unlike language, Bartel said, music is stored on “multiple dimensions,” which makes it easier to arouse the brain even decades later, and even after a diagnosis of dementia.

“How do you get at what is there? How can you get at the life, the engagement, the consciousness? What will cut through this utter state of boredom and withdrawal from reality of life? Music has a way to do that because it is so distributed,” Bartel said.

Russell cautions that music isn't a cure for Alzheimer's. But the iPod Project is one way to alleviate some of the depression and anxiety associated with it.

“We can give them some sense of joy and peace and contentment,” Russell said, adding, “If we get the music right, if it's music they're connected to emotionally, it's effective.”

For Domenica, the old Italian music is just right, although Bianchi jokes that she wishes the music that helped her aunt was different.

“Unfortunately, all her songs are from the Fascist period,” she said, smiling at her aunt. “But what can you do?”