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Cockeysville resident Jan Seiden, shown here while visiting a farm in Mt. Airy for abandoned horses, says the music of the Native-American flute has a calming effect on both man and beast.



Extolling
the soothing
powers of
a Native-
American
woodwind

Magic flute

Story by Bob Allen * Photos by Francis Gardler

Jan Seiden says the Native-American flute spoke to her "on a soul level" when she first heard it in 1990.

More specifically, she says, the music of the flute spoke to the pain she had been enduring while recovering from a neuromuscular disorder called polymyoneuropathy that inflamed her joints and left her barely able to comb her hair, hold a pencil or even feed herself.

The native flute music, she says, allowed her to journey through her pain and fears, "releasing it all to

the wind."

In the years since, the Cockeysville resident has mastered the indigenous woodwind instrument and spends much of her time speaking to others about what she says are the healing and restorative powers of its music.

According to Seiden, listening to the flute "reduces pain and brings people back to balance and alignment. It puts them in touch with God or nature."

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Dr. Sharon Montes, medical director of the University of Maryland's Integrative Medicine Clinic and assistant professor at University of Maryland School of Medicine, is familiar with Seiden's flute playing. She gives credence to its healing power. She said that scientific research has demonstrated the value of music as therapy.

"Research has been done by a number of people as to how sounds and music affect how people think, feel and act," Montes added. "Certain sounds via music affect health."

When sounds are transmitted from our ear to our brain, "it creates an electrical signal and changes in chemistry, and when you change chemistry you change health," she said.

"Sound is an incredible healing modality. It's very powerful."

Music as medicine

Seiden is a former Johns Hopkins University lab technician and research specialist at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. She studied concert flute for nine years while growing up on Long Island and now devotes her full-time efforts to using her flute music to heal others.

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(Music as medicine, continued)

She has won awards in Native- American flute competitions and in 2002 recorded a CD of her original flute compositions, called “Woodland Winds.” Earlier this summer she performed at a Native-American conference at the National Museum of the American Indian, in Washington, D.C.

“I want my music to be a gift,” said Seiden, who has studied and performed with Native-American flute players and healers. “My goal is to help people connect with themselves.”

She said she discovered its healing power firsthand in the early 1990s, when she was in the late stages of recovery from her illness, which, when it struck in 1985, landed her at The National Institutes of Health in Bethesda. She was almost totally disabled for about a month.

In 1993, she heard Hawk LittleJohn, a celebrated master of the instrument and a Cherokee medicine man from North Carolina, play the flute during a presentation he gave at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health.

“He spoke about his family’s ways, the ways of his ancestors and also played flute,” recalled Seiden, who has a Master of Science degree from Hopkins. He shared of his life experiences as a Cherokee elder living in the modern world, she said, and “it touched all of us deeply.”

A few months later, Seiden got the first of 34 handmade flutes of various shapes and sizes that she now owns, each of which has a slightly different tone and timbre, depending on various intricacies of design and the type of wood used.

Among her flutes are three she made herself.

Inspired by CDs by LittleJohn and other virtuosos such as Robert Tree Cody, R. Carlos Nakai and Grammy Award winner Mary Youngblood, Seiden began playing for hours as she recuperated. The music from the hand-carved woodwind, with its slowly, dreamy tempo, sustained notes and smooth glissandos, seemed to release her from her own physical and mental pain, she said.

“I would go out in the woods and listen to the sounds of the birds or the stream,” Seiden recalled.

Healing journey

Until 2001, the flute remained a solitary pursuit - or, in Seiden’s words, “purely a personal healing journey” - until friends heard her.

“People started telling me, ‘You’ve got to play for us. You can’t just keep this to yourself,’” she said.

In 2002, Seiden recorded and released “Woodland Winds.” That year, it was nominated for an Indian Summer Music Award in an annual competition sponsored by the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Office of American Indian Student Services and the Indian Summer Music Festival, which is held each autumn in Milwaukee.

Also in 2002, Seiden won first place in the tradition solo category at the Musical Echoes Flute Competition, held each year in Fort Walton Beach, Fla.

These days, most of Seiden’s public recitals have as much, if not more, to do with healing and therapy as with musical entertainment.

In recent months, she has played and held her “meditative journey” workshops at hospitals, senior centers, wellness centers, yoga and meditation classes - and even at a shelter for homeless horses.

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HorseNet, headquartered on a farm in Mt. Airy, cares for abused and unwanted horses. During a long day at HorseNet in June, she played for a small crowd of people who had come to pick out a horse to adopt and for several ailing horses themselves.

As she leaned over the fence and intoned a haunting, languid melody that sounded improvised, the horses, one by one, ambled over and nuzzled the flute, either entranced by its slow, hypnotic melodies or investigating whether it was edible.

The impact on human listeners was, however, more obvious; the music immediately brought a smile to their faces. A dozen or so listeners bought a copy of the CD.

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One of those was Adriene Young-Battle, a graphic artist from Prince George's County.

"I have a strong Creek (Indian) background, so to me this music is like coming home," Battle said. "It's beautiful, soothing music. To me, it's like a sedative. It's about connecting with God and my own dreams."

Elle Williams, founder of Horse-Net, heard Seiden play at a career expo about a year ago and was immediately hooked. She bought a copy of "Woodland Winds" and invited Seiden to play at a Horse-Net fundraiser. Since then, Williams has had Seiden back several times and recently bought a flute of her own.

Williams said she's been around horses long enough to read their emotions and discern subtle changes in their moods. She said they groove on the flute music in their own way.

"I think it relates to the horses on a different level that people don't seem to be able to focus on," she said.

As for humans, Seiden said they receive the sound on many levels. "I believe the brain is overrated," she said. "We have a lot of body wisdom." Seiden said she often gets phone calls and e-mails (through her Web site: www.janseiden.com) from people for whom her flute playing has had "very profound effects."

"They are people who were stuck or lost and discover some missing piece (within themselves), or their chronic pain was relieved."

Seiden said that promoting that sort of healing is how she sees her own life's mission.

"My role is to help people connect with themselves and deal with all the hang-ups and things we're afraid to look at," she said. "I offer them a very gentle way to process all that."

For more information on the Native American flute, go to the Web site of the International Native American Flute Association: www.inafa.org.

For more information on Jan Seiden, her music and wellness programs please visit:

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