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## Sharing soothing power of music

**Jerry O'Leary, a musician for 35 years, has worked with young and old alike to help put smiles on faces and ease health woes.**

**By Mary Anne Janco  
Inquirer Suburban Staff**

Her toes tapping, Miriam Cobb sang along with Jerry O'Leary as he played some old-time favorites, "Pennies from Heaven" and "On the Way to Cape May". Then, with maracas in hand, they picked up the beat to some John Philip Sousa marches. "Kate Smith, eat your heart out," O'Leary said as Cobb, an 86-year-old Secane resident finished singing "God Bless America."

"See that's how much your music has pepped me up," said Cobb, who lives independently although she has almost no vision. "Yesterday, I was so down in the dumps."

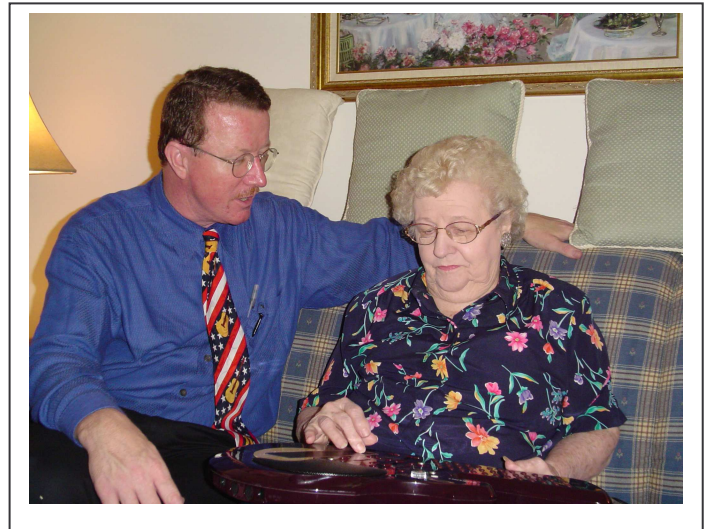
With his guitar and a bag of percussion instruments, O'Leary, a musician for 35 years, makes his rounds, using music as the therapeutic tool to help ease a variety of ills.

Since earning a master's degree in music therapy from Immaculata University in May 2000, O'Leary of Havertown has used his gift of music to work with clients age 3 to 97, who have an assortment of medical diagnoses from autism to Alzheimer's disease. "It's really important to play the kind of music the client enjoys," O'Leary said. "It invites them into the music." For seniors, it's usually music from when they were younger, he said. "It brings back good memories." Like many of his clients, Cobb particularly enjoys using the Suzuki QChord, a digital song card guitar. O'Leary puts in prerecorded songs so she can strum along to a Doris Day hit or any golden oldie.

"You feel like you're playing the music," he said. "Clients can also use the chords to make their own song," said O'Leary, who recently taught an autistic client a four-chord pattern.

Cobb, whose husband had played in several bands, said, "I always wanted to play the piano. I never got the chance."

Cobb, who grew up in the same Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood as O'Leary, clearly enjoyed the friendly banter with O'Leary between songs. "He brings a lot of happiness," she said.



**Jerry O'Leary with Miriam Cobb during a music therapy session in her home in Secane. Prerecorded song cards let her strum her favorite songs. O'Leary provides music therapy in clients' homes and senior centers. The benefits, he says, are proven.**

O'Leary, who began playing the guitar at 14 and has been singing as part of the Irish duo Scanlin & O'Leary for years, said he became intrigued with music therapy when his employer, a bank, offered retraining during a downsizing. He had previously worked as an original composer and technical director of the theater department at Rosemont College.

At Immaculata, where he earned his master's degree in music therapy, he said the focus is on spirituality and healing.

After working, mainly with children, for Settlement Music School in Philadelphia and for Archway Programs for special-needs children in Atco, Camden County, O'Leary formed his own business, MusicWorks, to provide music therapy at clients' homes and senior centers.

Since January 2001, he has provided music therapy to clients of the Delaware County Office of Services for the Aging. These seniors are eligible for nursing home care but remain living

independently. "Music therapy is one of the counseling services available to them," he said.

Louis Colbert, director of the county aging agency, said that funding comes from the medical assistance program and that spaces are available.

O'Leary now serves more than 20 senior clients in Delaware County, with one-hour sessions usually once a week, and he plans to start treating seniors through the Montgomery County aging program.

Music therapy is just starting to take off, O'Leary said, but the benefits have been recognized for years. Veterans hospitals saw the advantages of music therapy for soldiers during and after World War II.

Music "stimulates the entire brain," he said, making it particularly useful for those suffering cognitive impairment.

Al Bumanis, director of communications for the American Music Therapy Association in Maryland, said that, through music therapy, "some great strides have been made in neurological rehabilitation for those who have suffered strokes or traumatic brain injuries." Music is a "powerful tool," he said. It's definitely a tool to communicate and reach people, such as those with Alzheimer's disease, he said.

Music has "always had a power over us," Bumanis said. "It seems to be able to inspire and motivate and energize people."

For people who are isolated and depressed, O'Leary said, music "puts smiles back on their

faces. It makes them feel better about themselves. It encourages social interaction within group sessions and within families."

To address physical disabilities, "you can incorporate dance and movement" with the music, he said.

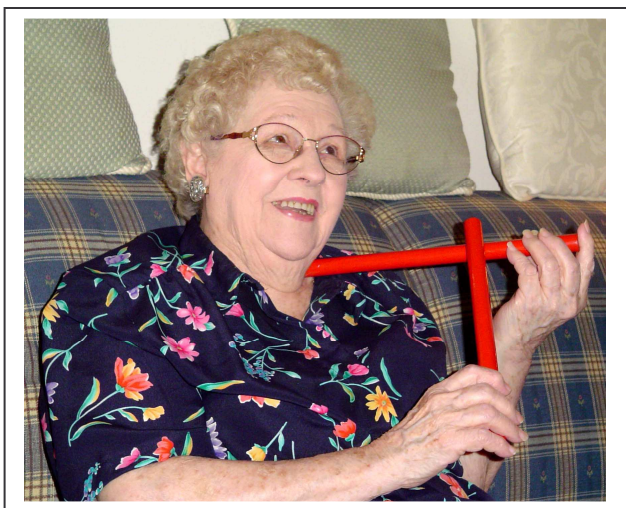
One of O'Leary's biggest challenges as a music therapist has been working with children with autism. He recalled a 3 1/2-year-old girl who was "supposedly nonverbal," he said. As he played children's music, she started verbalizing along with the melodies, he said. "It pulled her out of the shell of silence."

And he recalled an autistic teenager whom he taught to play some basic guitar. "He learned how to play 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star' and perform it. "I look for small victories," O'Leary said.

O'Leary has also worked with cancer survivors and their families. He helped children, who each had a parent with cancer, write a song expressing their feelings for their parent and then sing it to them, said Kathleen Coyne, program director for the Wellness Community of Philadelphia. The community has programs for those with cancer and their loved ones.

He has also worked with women with cancer, Coyne said. "He offers music as an opportunity for people to express their feelings and as a healing mechanism for people in crisis."

With his gregarious personality and musical talent, he is well-suited for the work he does, she said. "He really has a way of getting everyone up and singing and making music," she said.



**Cobb, 86, plays the sticks like a violin. She lives independently although she has almost no vision. She says the music peps her up.**

### **Snapshot**

#### **Jerry O'Leary**

**Age:** 49

**Most proud of:** My wife, Lori, and my son, Patrick, 5.

**Memorable performance:** "The Irish Festival at Penn's Landing in the early 90's. Playing on the river in front of a huge crowd, with the breeze at your back. It was a great time."

**Favorite song:** "The Irish Blessing". "It's our closing song. It's a pretty powerful song."

**Ultimate goal:** "To have a happy family and a rewarding career in music therapy where I can help people."

- For more information on MusicWorks, contact O'Leary at 610-449-9669 or visit the Web site at [www.musicworkswonders.com](http://www.musicworkswonders.com).
- Scanlin & O'Leary will offer a free concert, featuring Irish ballads and sing-alongs at 6:30 p.m. Saturday at the Scott Arboretum at Swarthmore College off College Avenue.