

STUDENT ROUNDS

Finding Their Voice

MEDICAL STUDENTS USE MUSIC TO HEAL PATIENTS AND FIND BALANCE.

The corridors of the SUNY Upstate Cancer Center echo with more than just the usual sounds of medical monitors and murmured conversation. If you're there on the right day, you might hear the melodic strains of a piano, the rhythmic pulse of a guitar, or the harmonious blend of voices in song. The live music, performed by Upstate medical students, is intended as therapy for cancer center patients and their families. But many of the participants have found the act of performing healing to themselves as well, providing a creative outlet and relief from the stress of their medical studies.

For these students, music isn't just a hobby—it's become an integral part of their journey toward becoming physicians.

Estelle Khairallah '27, who trained as a classical pianist, discovered the symbiotic relationship between her two passions when she performed at her class's Anatomical Gift Memorial Service, which honors the individuals who donated their bodies for educational use in Upstate's anatomy lab.

"There was something about honoring the donors and giving back to their families that was healing for me, even as it was healing for the families," she says. "We felt like we connected with these families, and people came up to us afterward to say things like, 'that song meant a lot to me. It was one of my grandfather's favorites.'" This powerful experience sparked the realization that music could serve as a bridge between the clinical and the deeply human aspects of medicine.

Wanting to replicate that experience, Khairallah went on to found the Music is Healing service learning group within Upstate's Community Engaged Learning (CEL) program.

Upstate medical students are expected to complete 40 hours of community service during the course of their medical



Members of the Spinal Chords: Shaun Sergott, who works in the Department of Neurology, Humza Khan '26, Olivia Laniak '29 Dean Larry Chin, MD, Michael Vertino MD '95, and Jian Li '26

education through approved CEL opportunities, and the CEL program offers student leaders course credit for developing and implementing service learning programs.

Music is Healing provides opportunity for students to use music as a pathway for service and healing by performing at Upstate's Cancer Center. But for students navigating the intense pressures of medical school, music serves as more than just community service—it's essential medicine for their own well-being.

"Medical school is hard, and singing is my expressive outlet," says Ariana Barlas '28. "When I heard about Music is Healing, I knew this was a perfect opportunity to be able to connect with patients on a level that wasn't clinical, and to be able to treat them in a way that they weren't able to be treated physically or with medication."

Barlas says she's been able to connect with a range of patients, family members, and staff through performing. "We have some regulars that keep coming back to listen to us, so it's been a really rewarding experience," she says. "And it's a lot of fun."

The program is currently led by Barlas and classmates Chiazam Nzeako '28 and Jacob Chacko '28.

Nzeako, a bass-baritone vocalist, says performing allows him to maintain a passion despite being "busier than I've ever been in my entire adult life." The act of making music together creates a space where students can be fully present with something they love, temporarily stepping away from the relentless demands of their studies.

"Despite our busy schedules, I think the fact that we take the time to relate to



Members of the Music is Healing service learning group perform at the Upstate Cancer Center.

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patients in this way and to be in touch with our humanity is really important. Especially as future physicians, it’s really important for us to be able to relate to our patients and also be in touch with our community,” says Chacko, who plays guitar.

To that effort, the group has evolved beyond weekly performances at the Cancer Center. In December, Music is Healing performed a benefit holiday concert at the New Academic Building that raised nearly \$800 for cancer research. And in May, the students held a free concert, Sounds of Healing, at the Community Folk Art Center. “We wanted to do something to give back to the Syracuse community,” says Barlas.

But Music is Healing is not the only organized outlet for musically inclined medical students. The Spinal Chords is a rock band that includes both student and faculty musicians, including Norton College of Medicine Dean Lawrence Chin, MD, on drums, neurologist Michael Vertino, MD '95, on bass, and internist Amit Dhamoon, MD/PhD '07 on guitar.

The Spinal Chords have played on campus during Welcome Week and at the Upstate Gala and at local venues including the Rockin’ the Redhouse fundraiser. In June, the band was the headliner at the White Coat Rock concert at the local club Funk n’ Waffles, which raised money for student scholarships at Upstate.

Olivia Laniak '29, lead singer for the band, is a music graduate from Case Western Reserve University. She met Dean Chin at a student lunch during her first week at Upstate “and the rest is history,” she says. Being part of the band has provided her an important musical outlet, and also helped her form close friendships with bandmates Humza Khan '26 and Jian Li '26 and with faculty members she might not have met otherwise.

Khan, guitarist for the Spinal Chords, says participation in the band “has been the ultimate way to keep a core part of my identity intact when so much of my time has been devoted to earning the next grade.”

“The best part of music is sharing it with others,” adds keyboardist Li, who was lead pianist for the Emory (University) Big Band as an undergradu-



Ariana Barlas '28 performs at the Sounds of Healing concert, put on by the Music is Healing service learning group, in May.

ate. “Coming into med school in a new town, I’ve been able to meet so many great people through music and really be a part of the community here.”

Shaping how future physicians view their relationships with patients and communities is a significant outcome of something that could be viewed as a hobby. Traditional medical education can inadvertently create hierarchical barriers between doctors and patients—and faculty and students—but music levels the playing field in unexpected ways.

“Hospital spaces can be so sterile,” says Khairallah. “If patients are able to see medical students in a different context—see them playing an instrument in the middle of the cancer center—that might actually help them feel more comfortable getting medical services from those students.”

And the converse is also true. “There’s something very important about being able to talk about something beyond medicine,” says Nzeako of patient interactions. “Something that might not heal somebody in the traditional sense we see in Western medicine, does still have impact. Even if it’s just bringing peace of mind, that can mean all the world. And it brings us peace of mind too.”