

The Magic of Music and Memory

Mashpee Congregational Church

September 20, 2026

How music serves as a powerful therapeutic tool for maintaining dignity and connection in dementia care is explored. Because written words are inadequate to describe music, and much of this story centers on music, we urge you to watch the special presentation at the end of the MCC Worship service of September 20, 2026, available on our website and on youtube. What follows is a brief overview and then an outline of the presentation. In addition, the highly informative Question & Answer session transcription is also available at the site.

OVERVIEW

Personal Journey: Randi shared the story of her mother, Elaine Lebar, a professional musician who lived with Alzheimer's dementia for seven and a half years at Keystone Place.

- Elaine transitioned from a highly accomplished educator and pianist to a resident in memory care, where she often felt lost without her musical identity.
- Randi discovered that engaging Elaine with the piano could bypass cognitive decline, improve physical strength, and reduce anxiety.
- The experience of Elaine going viral on TikTok in November 2020—reaching millions of viewers—highlighted the need for representation of those living in senior facilities during the pandemic.

Therapeutic Impact: Randi detailed several ways music and sensory engagement improved Elaine's quality of life.

- Music Therapy: Playing the piano provided physical benefits, such as increased leg strength and better balance, and emotional benefits like reduced agitation.
- Social Connection: Music facilitated interactions between residents; for example, Mary Alice, a resident who had lost language, was able to communicate through singing.
- Adaptive Strategies:
 - Using "therapeutic lies" to relieve anxiety (e.g., telling Elaine her car was in the shop to explain why she couldn't find her keys).
 - Using social media like TikTok or videos of children playing to redirect intense agitation.
 - Connecting with residents through their former passions, such as butterflies or national parks.

Caregiving Lessons: The presentation concluded with practical advice for caregivers managing cognitive decline.

- Avoid Argumentation: Randi emphasizes that arguing with someone with dementia is unproductive; instead, one should "go with the flow" to maintain peace.
- Repetition and Joy: Finding activities that work—like unboxing a gift multiple times or celebrating birthdays repeatedly—is essential because the joy is renewed each time even if the memory is lost.
- Dignity: Caregivers should focus on finding a person's "piano"—the specific passion or purpose that allows them to connect with their true selves despite their disease.

OUTLINE

Introduction and Musical Legacy

- By use of a video clip, Randi introduces her now deceased mother, Elaine Lebar, a passionate musician and educator.
- She then shares a clip of her mother playing "Rhapsody in Blue" by George Gershwin from memory at age 75 – the full 20 minute version.
- Randi reflects on how her mother's dementia taught her to live in the moment.

The Accidental TikTok Star

- In November 2020, a video of Elaine playing piano went viral on TikTok.
- The video reached 4.5 million views in one day and eventually over 11 million views.
- Randi explains she posted the videos to provide representation for seniors locked in facilities during COVID-19.

Early Signs of Cognitive Decline

- Randi recalls noticing early signs of decline during a trip to New York City in 2008.
- Her mother struggled with directions in Midtown Manhattan and forgot how to answer her flip phone.
- Despite these signs, her mother remained highly intelligent and capable of discussing current events.

Transition to Memory Care

- After her father passed away, Elaine's decline became more evident through safety concerns like driving.
- Her brother helped transition her into a senior living community, where she found companionship through her piano.
- Randi notes that while Elaine was often a "lost little old lady," she transformed when she played music.

Lessons in Dementia Care

- Randi learned that arguing with a person with dementia is unproductive and counterproductive.
- She discovered that "therapeutic lies" can be used to relieve anxiety, such as telling her mother her car was in the shop.
- Visiting near meal times helped ensure her mother was left in a positive frame of mind.

Music as Therapeutic Connection

- Music served as a vital communication tool for residents who had lost their ability to speak.
- The Randi observed that playing the piano improved her mother's physical strength, balance, and mood.
- Randi even introduced tap dancing to the memory care unit to encourage movement and joy.

Using Passions for Engagement

- Randi emphasizes finding a person's "piano," or the specific passion that connects them to their identity.
- She suggests modifying activities to fit current abilities rather than forcing old ones.
- She used social media and digital content strategically to stimulate conversation and interest.

Final Days and Lasting Impact

- Randi describes the honor of sitting vigil with her mother during her final two weeks.
- Elaine's last musical act was playing "Happy Birthday Rag," a piece she had written for her daughter.
- The presentation concludes by highlighting how music validates the worth of individuals living with dementia.