

#MonthlyMotivation: Clara Browning (class of 2010)



Alumna Clara Browning (nee Hardingham) has combined her love of music and her passion for people. Since leaving Putney she has started working as a Music Therapist treating those who are suffering from dementia.

What did you do after leaving Putney?

Since leaving Putney I have travelled, attended University and worked in various jobs! I was unsure about what kind of career I wanted to follow when I was at school so I decided to study Music at Durham University as this was the subject I enjoyed the most.

Did you always enjoy music?

I have very fond memories of music at Putney High School and spent a significant amount of time in the music department. Mr Hansell won me over with his unending enthusiasm for music and I believe music at Putney laid the foundations for my career as a Music Therapist.

How did you find out about Music Therapy?

I discovered Music Therapy during my undergraduate degree and I quickly realised it was a career I wanted to pursue. I had not heard of it before but learnt that I would be able to combine two of my favourite things: music and people.

What is Music Therapy?

It is actually one of four 'arts' therapies; Art Therapy, Music Therapy, Dramatherapy and Dance-movement Therapy. They work in a similar way to talking therapies, such as counselling or psychotherapy.

How did you get experience in this field?

After completing my Music degree, I returned to London to work as a classroom assistant in a specialist school for children with communication difficulties. Even before training as a therapist I could see how responsive many of the children were to music. I would sing to the children at various junctures in the school day, for example during transitions from one activity to another or whilst giving instructions. As I later learned, music is processed in multiple areas of the brain as opposed to language, which is processed in a more restricted part of the brain; hence why the children were particularly responsive to singing.

What did your Music Therapy training involve?

In 2015, I moved to Cambridge to start a Music Therapy Masters at Anglia Ruskin University. During the two-year course, I was placed in different clinical settings for 1-2 days per week. I worked in a child development centre in Cambridge for pre-school children with learning disabilities, and I returned (once again!) to Putney to work at the Royal Hospital for Neuro-Disability. The Music Therapy course was practical, experiential and theoretical, giving me a grounding in psychotherapeutic theory as well as guidance on how to use music in a therapeutic setting.

What did you go on to do?

I now work for a national network of care homes, the Methodist Homes for the Aged (MHA), as a music therapist for people living with dementia.

What does this involve?

I go into three care homes a week to run individual and group Music Therapy sessions. In practice, I mostly sing old, familiar songs to connect with the residents. The aim is to help to reduce the behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia, such as agitation, aggression, anxiety, confusion, depression and so on, as well as reduce medication intake. Music Therapy also provides the residents with opportunities for self-expression and reminiscence.

What do you enjoy about working as a Music Therapist?

More often than not, the clients' long-term memory is triggered and they join in. It regularly astounds me that music still 'makes sense' to the individuals I work with, even if they may be losing different cognitive faculties. A shared musical experience can be a lifeline for some of the residents, bringing coherence through familiar music that has been embedded in the long-term memory.

I find working as an arts therapist very fulfilling, and I whole-heartedly recommend it to anyone considering a career in the arts and/or psychology.

I feel blessed to have a career that I love, making a difference to the lives of others using the powerful medium of music.