

## The Awakening Power of Songs

by Liz Gibbons

I subscribe to Spiritual Cinema Circle as my small part in supporting independent movie producers. Each month I receive a DVD with a feature film and three shorts. When my younger son visited me recently we watched one of the feature movies, *Alive Inside*, and we were both deeply touched. Dan Cohen is a social worker who thought if he ever ended up in a nursing home he wanted to be able to listen to some of his favorite 60's music. iPods seemed to be the vehicle to do this. Researching them, he found that residents in nursing homes did not have iPods. So in 2006 he volunteered at a home in New York State to bring personalized music selections to residents. What happened changed his life and the lives of many nursing home residents.

One of the first residents featured in this film was Henry who had dementia. He needed help with all activities for daily living. He sat a great part of the day in a wheelchair with his head hung down. Henry responded with guttural grunts to most questions asked him. Dan learned from Henry's daughter what kind of music Henry liked and created a playlist for an iPod. Earphones were placed on Henry's head. When he heard the music his head shot upright, his eyes opened wide and he began to sway and sing along with the soloist on the recording. He essentially woke up. When the ear phones were removed he was still alert and could answer questions. When asked what music did for him he said it gave him a feeling of love. When Dan asked Henry his favorite song, Henry burst into singing all of "I'll Be Home for Christmas." This was an amazing transformation.

Another resident, Denise, was a bipolar schizophrenic. Her emotions were raw and strong. For the past two years she had used a walker. When Dan gave her an iPod with her favorite music she got up, pushed the walker aside and began dancing. She reached for Dan to join her and follow her steps as a duo.

John, at age 94, had dementia and just sort of existed. In his youth he had been drafted and served at Los Alamos. After the army he performed as a dancer/singer named Larry Stewart. His memory was now gone. Hearing the song, "Oh, Johnny," he began swaying in rhythm to the music, moved his feet in dance steps and sang. He had a beautiful voice. There was so much life in him that had been hidden.

It is sad that a doctor can request \$1,000 of antidepressants a month for a patient and get it easily, but not a \$40 personal music system. The only thing that counts is a pill in a bottle. The pill does not wake the patient up, but music does. There are an estimated five million with dementia in nursing homes. Fortunately an outsider like Dan came along to give some relief. He has introduced music at over 650 nursing homes and still counting.

Music activates more nerve pathways in the brain than any other type of stimulus. Our brain is wired for music. Marvelously, these parts of the brain are the last parts to be affected by dementia or Alzheimer's. Songs opened up communication with these residents, some of whom were unreachable in any other way. They became more social and needed less medication.

Hearing their favorite songs reconnected them to life again.