Her brittle, twisted mouth slanted at the same distorted angle that the rest of her body did. All of the smiles had probably slid out the corner of her lips years ago when the memories left too, leaving none for me to witness. Barbara was just the empty shell of a person that had once been. I closed my eyes to shut out the sight of her decimated body so I could listen to her...really listen to her essence...what she sounded like. I saw her heartbeat: an unsteady broken rhythm backed by the long-suffering and tenuous vibration of cello chords. The listless anguish to her melody felt like a chasm of resonance that could swallow anything.

My office in the nursing home wasn’t far away from her room, and when she called out desperately from her confused mind at the top of her lungs, I didn’t have the heart to ignore it even if I felt like I couldn’t offer her much. As her music therapist, I had spent months playing recordings of songs from her young adult years from an iPod and speaker on her nightstand, hoping to spark some vitality back into her coffin. I didn’t need the standard copy of the depression inventory to tell me that she was beyond depressed; I needed a way to bring a smile to her soul. When I arrived, her words had shrieked out hauntingly.

“I want to die! I don’t want to live in two worlds anymore! They keep playing tricks on me. Tell them to stop. I don’t want to be a burden to anyone anymore. OOOOHBBBBBBBBB! It hurts!”

She blinked at me from eerily lifeless eyes. I wanted her to know I had heard her song. She didn’t need someone to cheer her up, tell her she looked beautiful, or talk about family she couldn’t recall. She needed someone to hear her heart and play her sorrow. The chasm of anguish threatened to pull me in, but I tightened my grip on the Native American flute resting on my lap. The instrument had therapeutic effects on other restless dementia patients and it represented my last hope for Barbara.
She looked down at her own lap and I raised the wooden pipe to my lips. The Native Flute cannot be played without communicating one’s spirit, and I knowingly exhaled my life force into the instrument to play her own grief for her. Barbara’s eyes met mine the moment I started to play. I heard her heartbeat meet the vibrations of the wood under my fingers as her angular body relaxed into the chair and she started to bob her head in time to the music. Barbara seemed to revel in the mournful tones of the instrument, allowing them to wash over her and take her depression away. Her eyes closed in enjoyment as the last earthy tone lingered in the sterile room.

“That was beautiful.”

“How do you feel?” I asked.

The lopsided mouth straightened and the lips softened from frail plastic to rubber as they curved upward in a smile. “I feel rested and peaceful.” That was the moment her heartbeat changed from a crippled limp to the rhythm of a war drum.

Experiences like this are the kinds of encounters I have had while completing my practicum at Park Manor Rehabilitation Center. I use musical interventions, which carry much lower risks than medical ones, and study their effects on depressed dementia patients. Every day, I assess residents using musical assessments and the PHQ-9, a standardized depression inventory. I create goals using these tools and put together a care plan that guides the things I want to accomplish with each resident. These tasks have allowed me to fulfill my competencies in a unique and meaningful way.

All the BSW students are taught about the values, ethics, and competencies of social work, but now I experience them in real life. They pull at my heart as I talk to people about their life experiences, what music means to them, ensure that they have access to personal music, and play my Native Flute to decrease their depression and anxiety.

At this point in my research study, the average depression score of a dementia patient at baseline is 5.86. After six weeks of musical interventions, the average score has decreased to 2.6. These results and the personal experiences I have had doing my practicum at such a fantastic facility have really taught me about what it means to contribute as a social worker to the community around me in a meaningful way.

*Names have been changed for confidentiality.*