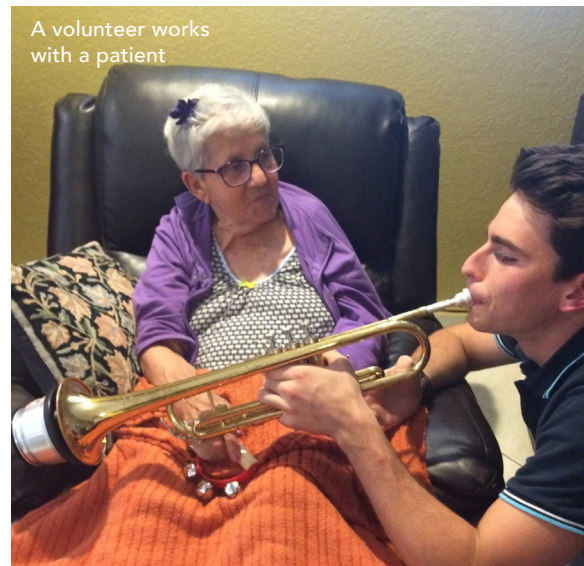




From front: Lauren Koff, Cristina Rodriguez and Carly, a session leader



A volunteer works with a patient

BEAUTIFUL MINDS

A local nonprofit organization uses music to ease memory loss

BY ALYSSA FISHER

What started out as two college students brainstorming their theses has the potential to become a statewide program teaching memory-loss patients to play music.

That's the goal of Lauren Koff and Cristina Rodriguez, graduates of the Honors College at Florida Atlantic University—and the brains behind Mind&Melody. The nonprofit organization uses music to improve the lives of people suffering memory loss from strokes, dementia, and Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. The program, which launched in 2014, now has five chapters across Florida and about 100 active volunteers.

There's no cure for memory loss, but studies have shown that stimulating activities help to slow its progression, Koff says. Mind&Melody has been endorsed for having the four key components that can accomplish this: social, cognitive, creative

and physical stimulation.

In one-hour interactive sessions, a team of high school and college students, and the occasional professional musician, visit participating health facilities. They use a rhythm-matching game to teach patients, who are usually 65 and older, the basics of music theory. Throughout, volunteers play various instruments, such as the piano, cello and violin.

After a few sessions, the patients learn how to play the instruments. The team breaks out color-coded keyboards and sheet music to help them learn simple songs, such as "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Row, Row, Row Your Boat."

Sometimes, the simple melodies spark the memories of patients with prior music experience. With some coaxing, they begin to play on their own. A man who stopped playing the piano because of his dementia was encouraged to sit at one in

his facility. He started playing "Moonlight Sonata"—the more he played, the more he remembered.

His wife teared up behind him.

"That was the first session I got emotional," says Koff, 24. "I had to turn around and tell myself to get it together."

Many Mind&Melody sessions begin in the late afternoon, a "sundowning" period when many patients can become agitated. The first few sessions at a wellness center were difficult, Koff recalls: People were disinterested, checking their watches and asking for their loved ones at 4:45 p.m.

"But about two or three months in, a total paradigm shift happened," she says. "It would be 5:15 and no one would notice. They were reluctant to leave, hugging team members.

"It was beautiful—this is what we were meant to do."

VOLUNTEER AT MIND&MELODY

Koff and Rodriguez are looking for more staff to run the programs at these three facilities. Visit mindandmelody.org and be prepared for a hands-on interview.

1) Miami Jewish Health Systems:

5200 NE Second Ave., Miami;
305.751.8626

2) My New Oasis:

2640 SW 32nd Court, Miami; 305.202.3607

3) Key Biscayne Community Center:

10 Village Green Way, Key Biscayne;
305.365.8900 (program is for older adults with no cognitive impairment)