

## Les Délices: music fosters meaningful conversation at Cleveland's VA Medical Center (Feb. 21)

by Stephanie Manning



Navigating dementia — a common, yet devastating part of aging — requires confronting all sorts of complex emotions. People with memory loss, their caregivers, and the medical teams who interact with them all understand this well. So when Les Délices commissioned a piece tackling this difficult topic, they made a special effort to bring the music to those who would resonate with it the most.

The Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center hosted the early music ensemble for two performance-discussion sessions on February 21, a moving and emotional afternoon of empathetic, honest conversations about memory loss all framed by the solace of music.

At 12:00 pm, medical professionals and providers gathered in the rec hall, where flags of the U.S., the Department of VA, and the military's many branches now provided a backdrop to a harpsichord and a collection of music stands. As part of the "Bioethics at Noon" series, the Les Délices musicians performed François Couperin's *La Visionnaire* and selections from Viet Cuong's world premiere, *A Moment's Oblivion*.

Baroque oboist Debra Nagy, violist da gamba Rebecca Landell, violinist Shelby Yamin, and harpsichordist Mark Edwards became a quintet when tenor Nicholas Phan joined them for Cuong's piece. As Phan explained to both those in the room and watching via livestream, *A Moment's Oblivion* is based on a Chinese myth of a man with memory loss, whose family is desperate to cure him.

A crafty scholar miraculously restores the father's mental state, but the "cured" man feels no relief — instead, he rages at his son and wife for what they did. Now that he must once again remember life's dark and difficult things, he muses, "Where shall I find another moment's oblivion?"

The ensuing discussion considered ethical, empathetic, and respectful approaches to treating those with dementia. One theme that continually resurfaced was that of truth-telling — how to avoid lying in a situation where telling someone the truth could risk them needlessly reliving painful memories.

“As providers, we’re trained to see dementia and death as the enemy,” said psychiatrist Dr. Neal Goldenberg (*pictured, center*). “So it’s such a treasure to see a story that looks at it as a gift.”

Considering there might be any positives to a loved one’s memory loss is an understandably thorny subject. But these are important conversations to have, Goldenberg said — especially when considering veterans and their traumatic past experiences.



For medical staff, emotions should not be the enemy either. Abby Cohen, the clinical ethicist who moderated the discussion, put it succinctly: “We are providers, but we are also people.” Dr. Melissa Klein, a primary care provider, agreed. She said she’d been reflecting on this concept recently after navigating a tough conversation with the wife of a veteran with rapidly-advancing dementia.

“Both music and storytelling can help you engage with your emotions — something that you might not have otherwise brought into your professional life,” Klein said. “That’s what was so cool about this session today.”

You don’t need to leave your personal connections at the door when you come to work, she added. “It only helps us to grow as providers and as physicians. All the time that we’re experiencing life outside of work, it makes us better here.”



After a break, the musicians picked up their instruments again at 2:00 pm for a smaller, more intimate session organized by the VA Caregiver Support Program. Cuong’s music, the libretto by Cleveland poet Dave Lucas, and the performance by Phan and Les Délices clearly resonated with the group of caregivers and a few patients. They repeatedly expressed their gratitude to the performers and the composer (*pictured, second from left*).

Afterwards, the listeners discussed their personal stories and some of their shared priorities as caregivers. Meeting their loved ones where they are. Taking things day by day, even moment to moment. The importance of caregivers as advocates in medical situations. How someone just listening to you can be a help.

Alesia Kata recently became a full-time caregiver for her elderly father, a U.S. Army veteran now experiencing memory loss. Listening to the music “was like an oasis for me today,” she said. She drove more than an hour from her parents’ home in Trumbull County just to get there.

Music has become an important connection between her and her father, she said. “I will start to sing a song, and before I sing it, he’ll tell me that he doesn’t remember it. But if I stop, he will finish the song, and it makes all of us smile. When he finishes the song, he’s beaming.”

A few months ago, she started learning to play the piano, and now she’ll often start and end his days with music. “I’m just learning, but my dad, he says, ‘Nobody in the family has ever done that before.’ He says, ‘I want you to keep going.’”

In a way, Kata’s experience of Les Délices’ mini-concert that afternoon resembled her dad’s own experience of listening to her piano playing. “I got my own free little concert, and it’s just dawning on me he feels the same way. What I’m doing with it — it does for him what being here did for me.”

*Photos by Timothy Harrison*

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