

A close-up photograph of several people's hands stacked together in a circle, symbolizing unity and teamwork. The hands are of various skin tones and are positioned in a way that they all meet at a central point. The background is dark and out of focus, emphasizing the hands.

Weaving melodies and lives



together

"How are you feeling today?" Amy Bliss Tenney, J.D., '18 M.A., asks a small group of refugees and asylum seekers from all over the world.

An interpreter repeats the question in French for the group members from French-speaking West African countries. Tenney invites the participants to express how they are doing using one of the instruments she has brought—hand drums, a glockenspiel and small percussion instruments. The group members have learned to communicate through sound when words fall short.

"I hope they feel like they can come, they can relax," Tenney says. "Sometimes they come in, they're in a bad mood, they have a headache, they don't feel good. But it's all right. You are who you are here."

Last year, Tenney and Sister Jo-El McLaughlin, OSB, '02 M.A., started co-leading this weekly group session, as well as a choir, for refugees and asylum seekers. Tenney and Sister Jo-El met through volunteering at Asylee Women Enterprise, or AWE, an organization in Baltimore, Md. that provides services for asylum seekers and refugees—at first just women, but now men and children as well—helping them heal from past trauma and establish a new life in the U.S.

Sam Dixon '19, who is earning his undergraduate music therapy degree from IU, assisted Tenney and Sister Jo-El with the music therapy group and the choir at AWE last fall. For him, this volunteer work among asylum seekers and refugees reinforced the importance of "helping to cultivate a space of appreciation for them."

"The music will hold me."

Refugees and asylum seekers leave their home countries for many reasons—domestic violence, political unrest or persecution for being minorities or dissidents, to name just a few dangerous situations they face. The main difference between refugees and asylum seekers is whether they start the process of obtaining legal protection in the U.S. when they are still living in their own countries or after they arrive.

Either way, it is a long, frustrating process that can take years. Music therapy can ease the strain refugees and asylum seekers feel.

"I've seen a transformation—from the time they walk in the door, a lot of them are tired," says Sister Jo-El.

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Once the music begins, it's like a switch that goes on, and they come alive.



Sam Dixon plays the guitar, Amy Bliss Tenney conducts, and Sister Jo-El McLaughlin plays the piano to accompany a choir made up of refugees and asylum seekers.

In order for the round to work, each group has to tune into itself and hold together and maintain its identity amid other identities.

Tenney rearranged the singers so that each of the three sub-groups had her, Sister Jo-El, or Dixon to lead them. They practiced the piece three times, improving gradually.

"I feel a lot of stress," one man told Tenney, "but I know that the music will hold me." During one music therapy session, a woman shared a song from the Éwé ethnic group of West Africa. The song combines a simple melody with a complex rhythm as the lead singer teases two members of the group at a time, saying in the Éwé language, "Can't you dance? Or do you have a stone in your back?" During the chorus, everyone chants while the two participants arch their backs and roll their shoulders in time with the music, proving that nothing is hindering them from dancing.

Seeing the group's enthusiasm when they sang this song, which was already familiar to some of them, Tenney, Sister Jo-El and Dixon thought the choir should add it to their repertoire.

Tenney and Sister Jo-El chose six songs for the choir that are mostly in English, with two that include some verses in French. The choir members find these songs challenging to sing, since most of them have limited English proficiency. Tenney conducts the group at a slow pace, and Sister Jo-El and Dixon accompany them on piano and guitar and sing along with the choir members to help them learn the music and the words.

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To add to the challenging nature of the music, two of the songs are rounds. At one of their weekly practices in October, the choir members were struggling to stick with their parts.

One man said he couldn't distinguish the three parts from each other. "It sounds like a mess!" he objected.

Tenney and Sister Jo-El reassured him that the group was getting stronger each time they sang their parts. "It's supposed to be woven together like that," Tenney told him. After the rehearsal, Dixon reflects, "In order for the round to work, each group has to tune into itself and hold together and maintain its identity amid other identities." It's a metaphor for the goal of this music therapy work he and Sister Jo-El and Tenney are doing—helping the choir members weave their lives into their new community in a harmonious whole. The refugees and asylum seekers have uniquely beautiful cultures and experiences to share with their American neighbors.

"I'd like to help them feel whole again and proud of who they are, and to integrate themselves into this new community," Tenney says. "There's a lot of research that shows that music can help neurologically with people who are suffering from trauma or experiencing pain. It can be a pathway for people to connect with themselves, but also for them to connect to others."

Different paths to music therapy

Tenney and Sister Jo-El were surprised to discover that they had both earned their master's degrees in music therapy at Immaculata. Though their careers had taken different paths, they both came

to work with refugees and asylum seekers using music as an instrument of healing.

Sister Jo-El was born to a mother who was musically gifted, and when she was adopted at 11 days old, the Sisters within the Archdiocese of Philadelphia who had been taking care of her encouraged her adoptive parents to give her music lessons. She became her church's music director at 14 and pursued a career in music education.

In 1996, Sister Jo-El traveled to La Scala Santa of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré in Quebec, the same shrine her adoptive parents had visited decades earlier to pray for a child. While there, she prayed to become a healer of women.

"Things evolved gradually" in answer to her prayer, she says. She enrolled in the master's program at Immaculata and then taught in the program for a few years. She joined the Benedictine Sisters and offered music therapy to children at a special needs school. In 2013, her spiritual directress suggested that she use her musical gifts at AWE, which the Benedictines had recently founded. Since then, Sister Jo-El has used music as a healing agent for refugees and asylum seekers, offering them private music lessons, playing her guitar and singing with them, and now, partnering with Tenney to offer group sessions and lead a choir.

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Tenney worked as a non-profit immigration attorney for 15 years before deciding to become a music therapist and serve immigrants in that capacity.

"I've always had an interest in human rights and people from different countries," Tenney says. "And I've also been in choirs,

musicals. I've played piano since I was little. I've studied lots of instruments. So even though this wasn't the primary career that I chose initially, it turns out that this is the perfect way to combine my passion and skills."

Tenney received an Open Society Institute-Baltimore fellowship in 2017 and developed a music therapy program to promote healing for vulnerable immigrants and to help them become integrated into the community.

Dixon met Tenney through his mother, who worked with Tenney in immigration law. A music therapist visited one of Dixon's classes when he was at community college, piquing his interest in the field. He decided to pursue a career in music therapy, transferring to Immaculata to earn his bachelor's degree.

Dixon was touched during his time working with the refugees and asylum seekers at AWE. "Through the music, sharing these similar experiences, this relationship of trust forms between me and a lot of the clients there, despite the language barrier," he says. "I've grown in a felt sense of shared humanity."

Meaningful connections through music

To give the choir of refugees and asylum seekers an opportunity to share their music with a wider group, Tenney and Sister Jo-El arranged for them to perform at a voter registration drive last October. The day was cold and windy, but the choir members were all smiles as they stood up to perform.

"They seemed proud," Tenney said. "They seemed to appreciate having something to share that was unique to them."

The performance turned into a community music therapy event, as attendees listened, danced along with the choir members and then participated in a drum circle. Tenney started with a basic beat, and others added onto it, taking turns leading the improvisation.

This was Tenney's and Sister Jo-El's goal for the choir's performance—to see a community begin to form through music. They hope to hold some performances in the future at local churches that have invited the group.

"When you enter into a music experience together, there's a real, deep sharing of humanity," Dixon notes. "In a short time, music therapy has facilitated some pretty meaningful connections with people from all over the world. I feel honored to be part of it."