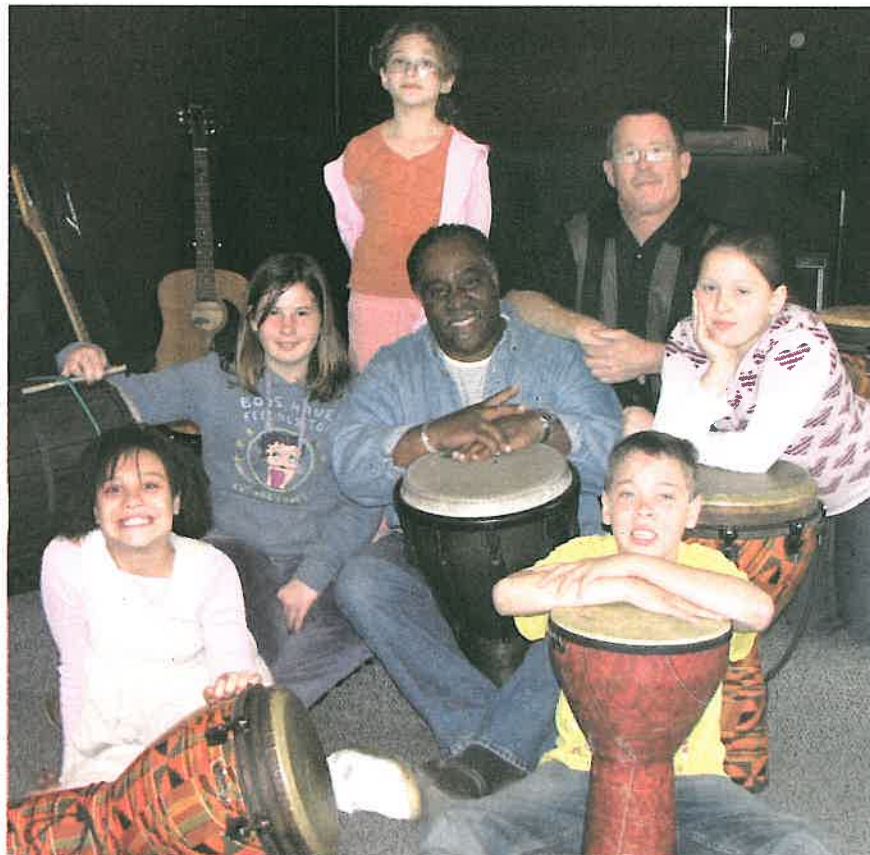


Healing from the Heart

Drum therapy helps at-risk kids recover, one beat at a time



Sundiata Kata's drum circle celebrates children.

Mary Hay Davis

“Can you feel the beat within my heart? Can you see my love shine through the dark? Can you see that you must be a part of that beat in my heart?”

This popular Latin-based dance tune by Lisa Lisa is evocative of the powerful sway and life essence that rhythm and music have on the human condition.

The drum circle program at the San Diego Center for Children uses music and rhythm to help troubled children learn to communicate and trust in new ways. The Center treats children who suffer from mental, emotional and behavioral problems, and has served juveniles throughout San Diego County on both an inpatient and outpatient basis for more

than 120 years.

Music Program Director Sundiata Kata explains that while music therapy has been a long-recognized and effective form of treatment for many years, the drumming program brings a new dimension to this type of therapy.

“Music helps kids express themselves, whether it be through instruments, drama or dance,” says Kata. “A lot of these kids



The San Diego Center for Children

The San Diego Center for Children is the community's oldest accredited nonprofit mental health organization. Its mission is to help children and adolescents develop a healthy sense of self-worth by offering comprehensive programs for children with behavioral, emotional, social and educational issues.

To learn more about the program, visit the SDCC

Website at www.centerforchildren.org, or call 858-277-9550.

have never experienced success. They've been beaten down psychologically and emotionally. For many of these children, it's the first time they've ever really expressed themselves."

The Center treats approximately 70 children onsite, and up to 80 other children through outpatient therapy and other forms of community outreach.

One reason music is such an effective form of therapy is that there is no need to force words from children who oftentimes don't know what they are feeling.

Drum Circle Basics

Drum circles are becoming increasingly popular, both for therapeutic purposes, and to build camaraderie and community. Whether you want to start a drum circle for your local playgroup, or participate in a more organized circle, head to www.remo.com and click "Drum Circles."

"The children feel safe here," Kata says. "They don't have to speak or use words. The camaraderie of the circle breaks down barriers and opens up dialog in a safe, non-judgmental environment."

Kata relates the story of one particular music-therapy success story. "Many children come into the program very reserved and withdrawn. We had one girl in particular who was like a new flower, very closed up. Once she started expressing herself through music, she blossomed and really opened up. The effect was not just in the music class, but also carried over into her other classes as well."

These particular drum circles involve more than just drumming. While the instruments are diverse (and include African and Latin percussion instruments, xylophones, rain sticks and tambourines), they are really only a means to a more noble end—to get children to recognize the emotions they are feeling inside, and help them learn to convey those feelings in a healthy, acceptable manner.

Drum circle is not just about rhythm and drumming, however. While the circle does start out as music-based therapy, it

also incorporates levels of self-awareness and introspection into the program.

Kata does this by asking the participants to drum how they are feeling, asking them to drum "Happy" or "Angry." Often, this is the only way these children know how to express themselves and release pent-up emotions.

"One of our success stories recently came back and spoke at the Center's annual dinner," Kata says. "She is about 27 years old now, but had a very tough childhood, which included being abused by her biological father, who later left the family. At first she was no-nonsense and overly mature, wearing makeup and stockings.

However, through the music, both the drumming and the singing, she became a leader, not only in the program, but later in getting custody of her younger sister. She has three children of her own, and has battled serious health issues. At the dinner, she told her story, and related how music was the key that helped her get through what she was enduring. She said that when she thinks about her childhood, she thinks of it as her time here at the Center."

While the emphasis for this new program is on self-expression through rhythm and drumming, one of Kata's favorite songs (and one he uses as a staple for his choir group) is R. Kelly's "I Believe I Can Fly," whose second verse aptly sums up the experiences and outcomes of many of the program's children:

"See I was on the verge of breaking down/Sometimes the silence can seem so loud/There are miracles in life I must achieve/But first I know it starts inside of me."

Kata says, "Our goal is to help young people turn their lives around. I often tell them, 'Sure you've been dealt a bad hand, but it's up to you to play well the hand you're dealt.' We try to help them learn to put their baggage down, empower themselves and move on, and to stop the negative cycle so they can enjoy all of life's potential positive outcomes." ♦

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