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FEATURED

Renowned violinist and mother shares beautiful music with children's hospital

By Kim Grizzard Staff Writer
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Renowned violinist Hye-Jin Kim, associate professor of violin at East Carolina University, shares her musical gifts with children at Health Maynard Children's Hospital. "She's extremely talented," Kathryn Jarvis, manager of children's services, said. "You can listen for 30 seconds and know that."

Contributed photo/ECU Health

Shortly after the birth of her son, when renowned violinist Hye-Jin Kim was invited to tour a hospital neonatal intensive care unit, it was not only what she saw but what she heard that tugged at her heartstrings.

There was a somber silence broken only by beeps and whirs of medical apparatus monitoring infants who were ill-prepared to live outside their mothers' wombs. What a stark contrast it was to what she

had experienced with her newborn. Theodor had been born healthy in 2017 at what was then Vidant Medical Center and taken to his home in Greenville where he would be surrounded by music.

“My son is fortunate enough to grow up with hearing all this music so available around us,” Kim said. “That’s not the same for all families and all babies.”

The music educator, who began studying violin in her native South Korea at age 8 and entered Philadelphia’s esteemed Curtis Institute of Music at age 14, had taken care before baby Teo’s arrival to not only prepare the nursery but also a collection of a dozen or more lullabies to soothe her son.

“Everything is upside down when you’re a new mom and learning how to nurse, how to sleep, how to take care of this new baby,” she said. “Because it was my first time having a baby, I didn’t know how long I wouldn’t be able to play the violin after giving birth, so I had a crazy idea of recording some songs so that I can play for him without me having to take a violin out.”

At East Carolina University, where she and her husband, Ara Gregorian, are faculty members in the School of Music, Kim recorded the collection, titled “Songs My Mother Taught Me.” It includes Brahms’ “Lullaby,” “Dreaming,” by Robert Schumann, “Love’s Greeting,” by Edward Elgar and “Moonlight” by Claude Debussy, songs that she had loved since childhood and that she hoped would resound with the next generation.

Those same songs played through her mind as she toured the hospital alongside her musician husband and her father, a physician.

“Our son was born very healthy so I didn’t know that side of the hospital, how dire it could be at times and how intense things are,” she said. “We’re walking through the NICU and it struck me that it would be so wonderful to bring some music here.”

Since 2019, the award-winning musician has done just that, bringing the songs her baby heard to infants at in NICU and the special-care nursery at ECU Health Maynard Children’s Hospital. But the Lullaby Dreams initiative does not deliver Kim’s recordings to be played as background music in the units. It brings the musician herself, who performs private concerts for some audience members who weigh little more than the violin she is holding.

“We could have been just making the recording available and playing some music just through the speaker, but there’s something so powerful about live music,” Kim said. “We wanted to make that

possible.”

Although she grew up in the home of a pediatrician and a child psychologist, Kim spent far more hours in concert halls than in the halls of a hospital. Appearances at major venues across North America, Europe and Asia could not prepare her for what she would encounter in the NICU, where in early 2020 a family invited her to play at the bedside of a child who was being removed from life support.

“I was crying. Everyone was crying,” Kim recalled. “I remember that experience a lot.”

While numerous studies have shown music to be beneficial for children, including premature infants, much care had to be taken with the hospital’s tiniest patients. Working with occupational therapist Sarah Harrell, Kim used a decibel meter to set the tone.

“Babies respond to music,” Harrell said, “(but) premature babies are very sensitive to stimulation and they can be easily over stimulated. She played very softly, and she played in the lower pitches so it wouldn’t be as intense, just to accommodate.”

Kim began making weekly visits, filling the unit with sweet sounds of classical lullabies. Families who could hardly believe their ears opened doors or peeked out from behind curtains to see a petite brunette making her way down the hallway on what has come to be called the “lullaby stroll.”

Lisa Legado, whose granddaughter, Emi, spent nearly five months in the NICU beginning in July 2019, recalls hearing the music for the first time when she was visiting the hospital one night.

“I had never seen that before,” Legado said. “My daughter and I were very surprised. We just thought it was so wonderful.”

Legado had no way of knowing that the soft-spoken violinist outside of Emi’s room had performed as soloist with major orchestras worldwide. But she knew that the music was a welcome respite from the sounds of the NICU.

“It can be very scary in there,” Legado said, “especially if there is a baby very close by where you are and the alarms start going off.”

She recalled that Emi responded well to the music, which appeared to have a soothing effect on her. She stopped crying as if to listen.

While Lullaby Dreams is not designed as a scientific study of the effect music has on infants, Kim has seen some babies turn their heads in the direction of the sound. Parents of others have told her that the music had a calming effect, slowing their child's breathing or improving sucking during feeding.

"The parents are relaxed, too, and not just the baby," Harrell said. "They're under a lot of stress, so it is beneficial for them, too. I know it makes a difference."

After visits in the NICU and special-care nursery throughout nearly all of 2019, the music stopped in March 2020 with the arrival of COVID-19. Kim, who created some virtual concerts during the pandemic, was unable to return to live hospital performances until October 2021.

When she did, Kathryn Jarvis, manager of children's services, was waiting. Jarvis, who previously had heard the music when she was working as a nurse, invited Kim to play for other pediatric patients.

"I just felt like it had such a benefit on those little babies, I was excited to see the benefit it could have on the older pediatric patients," Jarvis said. "We've just seen an impact on the staff as well. Obviously, she has a passion for what she does. She makes an impact far bigger than I think she even realizes."

Kim is looking for ways that Lullaby Dreams could have an even larger reach. She would like to add visits to high-risk maternity patients to her hospital musical rounds and hopes to bring in other musicians who could help extend the initiative to other hospitals in the ECU Health system.

After recording an online musical story time during COVID, Kim recently re-created the literary and musical pairing live at a children's museum in Wilmington. She hopes to bring similar offerings to additional locations including Seascape Theater at Maynard Children's Hospital. The theater is hardly the kind of prestigious venue where Kim has given performances throughout her career, but that makes no difference to this mom.

"I was very appreciative of all the care I got from staff and doctors there, so as a mom and as a patient there, a part of it is my way of giving back," she said. "I'm passionate about young babies and children and how music can be used and can help make their life a little better in that setting.

"I do it as a mom," Kim said. "It's more of a heart project for me."

For more information about Lullaby Dreams, visit www.hyejinkim.com/lullaby.