

Tribute

A Tribute to Helen Leith

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Photograph 1: Helen Leith

JESSICA ATKINSON

I knew Helen as a friend and colleague. We were both music therapists, sharing a job for a while, and our lives and interests overlapped in many ways. More than anything, I remember Helen for her encouragement and integrity, as well as for her humour and warmth. She seemed to look at the world calmly, always seeing the big picture without muddling what she saw with personal ego. From this came a wisdom and insight that was so evident in the remarkable work she undertook with women prisoners. She clearly loved this work, respecting the women greatly and delighting in the music that was unlocked in their lives. Helen's doctoral research is clear and powerful. I very much hope it will contribute to the resettlement of women prisoners for years to come. As a friend, Helen was supportive, generous and kind, and I miss her very much.

PHOENE CAVE

During my time as Head of Music Services at Nordoff Robbins, it became necessary for me to set up the music therapy post that Helen was delivering at the HMP Bronzefield prison for her PhD. I was, in truth, quite scared of going and meeting Helen there. She soon put me at ease with her very matter of fact approach to it all and took care – and a quiet delight – in showing me around and introducing me to staff and women.

I remember going into the Healthcare and Separation and Care units and being very wary as inside, there were some very unwell and unpredictable women. I remember waiting in an office and marvelling at Helen's easy approach, having to talk to prisoners through the grills of the doors. She seemed to combine complete approachability with a very gathered stillness.

In 2013, she asked me if I would cover for her delivering music therapy at the prison if she got too sick to continue. She seemed to have belief in my ability to do something, which utterly terrified me and her quiet faith gave me confidence. I knew I could never say "no" to her request.

She loved this job with a passion. It was more than a job; in truth, it was her life and she put her heart and soul into it. When I asked if I would find it depressing and too intense, she would say how uplifting she found it. I really believed her, but could not quite think how this could be.

When I went to meet Helen at the little cafe around the corner from the prison, the first day she

took me in to show me the ropes, we smiled at one another and both our eyes filled with tears when I said, "I wouldn't do this for just anyone you know".

It was so horrible having to take the torch from someone, knowing she didn't really want to hand it over but had no choice.

Over the first few months when I was working at HMP Bronzefield, it became clear to me how much Helen was known, respected and frankly, loved, by so many people, both staff and prisoners. Simeon Sturney, the chaplaincy manager, said so at her funeral – everyone from the cleaners, maintenance department, psychologists, prison officers, operational support officers, offender managers all knew her. And I made it very clear whenever I introduced myself, that I was covering for Helen Leith.

She was such an incredible support to me for the first year I was there. Even though she was battling her illness and trying to complete her PhD, she always said that I could ring her at any time, and in truth, there was no-one else in the world who could possibly understand how demanding and trying the job can be, but also how transformative and triumphant it felt at times. I was always very touched that Helen wanted to be my friend too as we seemed so different on the outside but we both had such a passion for the work, and I feel so blessed that we could share that with one another with a complete understanding.

I could never have taken on the job that I love so much without Helen teaching me early on not to judge or dismiss anyone – and that sometimes the best work can be achieved with women who others have completely written off. Helen also gave me the courage to work in both Separation and Care, and Healthcare, the two places that scared me so much when I first visited. I kept thinking, if Helen can, I can. And even after she died, I would still continue to chat with her in my head and ask her what she would do with certain situations. Her clarity and cool head, her absolute compassion and her ability to listen were inspiring. How Helen managed to do the job along with a PhD and receiving mobile chemotherapy, I find utterly astounding.

She was a star who shone very bright. Even if I leave HMP Bronzefield, I have a responsibility to Helen to ensure that the torch is passed to the very best person it can be. Similarly, I have a responsibility to ensure that this tremendous work she started continues to grow nationally. My gentle promise to her is that I will continue to work and / or promote music therapy with female offenders. She deserves this legacy, and more offenders deserve to work with great music therapists like Helen Leith.

ORII MCDERMOTT

Helen and I met for the first time at Copenhagen airport in November 2010 while waiting to board a plane for Aalborg. Helen, Julian O'Kelly and myself were among the seven PhD students awarded a mobility stipend from the Doctoral Programme in Music Therapy, Aalborg University where the late Tony Wigram had obtained a mobility grant from the Danish Research Council. We were about to attend our first PhD course, all eager and a little anxious to embark on a PhD journey. From the first conversation I had with Helen, I was struck by her warm non-judgmental curiosity, her honest enquiring mind, and Helen-specific dry sense of humour.

As all researchers know too well, any PhD journey has expected and unexpected obstacles to overcome, but it is probably fair to say that Helen's PhD journey had more challenging obstacles to overcome than an average researcher, as it was not long after her PhD had started that she was diagnosed with cancer. However, the news did not affect her professionalism towards her academic work and her passion for improving the lives of the women prisoners she was working with. She coordinated blocks of chemotherapy so that she could still participate in the biannual Aalborg PhD courses and produced an elaborate PhD proposal, which looked more like a big chapter from a PhD thesis.

Recurrence of her cancer in September 2012 did not hinder her determination to progress through her academic work. I sensed physical fatigue was impacting on the speed of her work, but she never compromised the quality of her work.

Just before the spring PhD course in 2013, Helen sent me an email:

Hi Orie,

The chemo went off ok but I have been having a few problems with side effects this time. Still, I am undaunted and shall travel to Denmark to plan on Sunday. I will hopefully catch up with you at least briefly at some stage during the journey but will definitely be requesting assistance at the airport. I haven't managed to do anything yet for the presentation but hopefully will get something together by the time I have to present. How are you doing? I am looking forward to hearing how work is progressing.

See you Sunday

XX Helen

Helen genuinely appeared to enjoy the special ride in 'the airport buggy' and priority boarding. She was also very kind to share this privilege with me by introducing me as her 'carer' to airport staff so that I could also enjoy the ride.

Helen took pity on me when I explained to her how empty I felt after handing in my PhD thesis in October 2013 and invited me to collaborate with her. I was asked to code her interview transcripts to validate her coding. Between attending her hospital appointments, she sent me interview transcripts with instructions. Getting to know Helen's clinical work through the words of her clients was extremely powerful.¹ I felt privileged to have a glimpse of her work but also found it extremely exhausting to code the stories of these women, as many were emotionally so intense. I do not know how anyone can manage clinical work with these women so effortlessly. The coding process progressed slowly but steadily. Helen wrote:

Hi Orij,

Could I ask you to cast an eye participant 5(14)'s coding charts. Once again I was struck by how much we had in common although I certainly didn't find her that easy to code. I am starting to get quite excited as I can start working on the table in the dining room with cut up bits of chart to see how things develop when I try to find overarching categories in the cross-participant analysis. (-: As far as the hospital is concern, no it wasn't planned, routine visit and though they let me out and I was able to celebrate over the weekend I ended up in hospital again on Monday. So work has been a bit patchy. I am now back at Piggotts and feeling fine but my chemo is delayed until some test results come through. Perhaps next week. We will see.

Despite increasing hospital visits and hospital stay, Helen completed her PhD thesis on time. Her successful PhD defense in Cambridge in October 2014 was just as expected, but it was still an amazing triumph for a scholar who had endless extra obstacles to overcome.

HELEN ODELL MILLER

Helen Leith was a gifted music therapist, and at her funeral, letters were read out from women prisoners and staff that worked with her in a women's prison which testified to this. One lady described Helen's song writing with her in music therapy sessions as 'life-changing'. Helen was also a brilliant scholar, and I was privileged to be her supervisor for her PhD during which time she developed cancer and sadly died. At all times, she was positive, strong, warm, clear thinking and enjoyed her research so much. When visiting her at home towards the end of her life, she was still full of energy for her work and those around her.

One special memory will be her public PhD defense which we held at Anglia Ruskin University in October 2014. She gave a brilliant hour-long presentation on her innovative research to an audience of 50 people, whilst feeling quite weak, had a short rest, and was then examined in front of us all (Danish style as she was registered for her PhD at Aalborg University, Denmark). She held challenging dialogues with examiners Gro Trondalen, Lars Ole Bonde, and Lorraine Gelsthorpe! She had such intellectual, physical and psychological stamina – we held the examination in the UK as she was not sure in advance whether she would be well enough to travel to Denmark. At the ceremony, she gained her doctorate, and joined in a great party! The following week on 3rd of November 2014, I happened to be in Aalborg University, Denmark, examining one of her fellow PhD students, and there was Helen – she had travelled over to see her friend and colleague and to have further celebrations there. Sadly a few weeks later, she died, but having accomplished her PhD and given so much to others around her. In addition to her academic and musical gifts, she could make PowerPoint and graphics do anything on a computer! Her presentations will never be forgotten for their visual, aesthetic and auditory character, as well as the text of course.

¹ Extracts can be found in Helen's PhD thesis '*Music therapy and the resettlement of women prisoners: A mixed methods exploratory study*': <http://vbn.aau.dk/da/publications/music-therapy-and-the-resettlement-of-women-prisoners%28207cba18-475f-4827-a733-d13c44259abe%29.html>



Photograph 2: Helen Leith's PhD defence, October 2014 (From left to right: Gro Trondalen, Orii McDermott, Niels Hannibal, Lars Ole Bonde, Helen Leith, Lorraine Gelsthorpe, Helen Odell Miller, Hanne Mette Ridder)

Helen's PhD, '*Music Therapy and the Resettlement of Women Prisoners*' shows how individual music therapy contributed to resettlement for women prisoners, and also how music therapy help to change self-perception positively for these women. A further tribute by close friends and family was published in the Guardian recently, and can be read here:

www.theguardian.com/music/2015/mar/04/helen-leith-obituary

Her work at the prison will be continued by Phoene Cave, and no doubt that Helen has made an enormous impact on the prison, not only in her music therapy work in the room with women, but also within the prison itself. Staff described her as a supportive colleague they could always talk to. One of my lasting memories is playing piano duets spontaneously at the end of a PhD joint supervision meeting, with the other Danish supervisor. We were embedded in Mozart - it was a wonderful musical experience, in the middle of which we suddenly looked up and saw the other supervisor dancing quietly across the room, and it turned out, he was an accomplished dancer, inspired by Helen's creativity to reveal this-while Helen's dear friend John looked on. I thank Helen for her inspiration and for all she gave to others and hope we can publish her work soon more widely for others to see.

MERCÈDÈS PAVLICEVIC

I have known Helen through various roles and conversations since the time when she trained as a music therapist at Nordoff Robbins London. Here are some reflections and abiding memories from working with Helen:

Supervising her MMT research dissertation when she was a second-year student at Nordoff Robbins, Helen and I argued about using the word 'reify': I was not keen, and Helen insisted. She convinced me.

Going with Helen to Royal Holloway Prison, when she was exploring possibilities of starting up music therapy in prisons with women. The environment was dark, cold, noisy, unwelcome, and signalled clearly that there was no time or interest in music therapy, or in our visit. I was shocked and overwhelmed by the place and its chemistry. Helen was undaunted and persistent.

Sitting on the lawn at her home in Kilburn, after a discussion about work in prisons; and discussing God, faith, religion and spiritual practices. Helen was thoughtful, incisive, critical, and reflective. I listened.

Helen running a group music therapy session at Bronzefield prison, with my observing as part of the hand-over for taking over her work when she was to go on extended sick-leave because of chemotherapy. The women loved her. The duty officer, who was required to sit in because of one particularly difficult woman, was less than pleased to be there. Helen formed us into a group playing and singing, in that confined claustrophobic space.

Texting Helen on Christmas Eve from Bronzefield prison, having just played at the Carol Service to tell Helen that the women and staff were asking after her, and wishing her and John well at Christmas time. Helen replied in moments. It was our last communication.

ALEXIA QUIN

Music as Therapy International came to know Helen as a result of work she began in Rwanda back in 2005. Eva Roettgers, a medical doctor and psychotherapist working with traumatised people in Kigali, invited Helen and Judith Nockolds to look at how music therapy might help the community with which she was working.



Photograph 3: Rwandan carer making music, Kigali 2008

The following year Helen and Judith visited various institutions providing care for children and young people with a wide range of disabilities. They could share with Rwandan care staff some of the ways that music could be used therapeutically and they further built on this when they returned in 2008. It was following this trip that Helen approached us, and we started working together on developing the use of music in two care settings in Cyangugu, a rural area in South West Rwanda.



Photograph 4: Helen filming the training DVD, 2014

The Rwanda team grew to include Caroline Anderson and Nicky Haire, who delivered a 6-week skill-sharing project under Helen's wise guidance and supervision, and our Projects' Manager Jane Robbie. We have all been robbed of a valued colleague and friend, but the legacy Helen has left

in Rwanda is a testimony to the remarkable person she was: Music programmes continue to this day in the two care settings in Cyangugu, and Helen's vision led to more projects promoting the role of music across the country. A further 17 local staff have been running music sessions in three more care settings, and a training DVD narrated by Helen will be fundamental in helping make the benefits of music as therapy accessible in many more districts in Rwanda this year. None of this would have happened without her.

Throughout our work together we came to admire her gentle, sincere nature and professional approach. The strong relationships she formed with our Local Partners in Rwanda, and her cultural understanding were the foundations of all our work in the country. She was a joy to work with and someone through whom we learnt a lot. She is sorely missed but remembered with great fondness and admiration by all at Music as Therapy International, our Local Partners and children in Rwanda.



Photograph 5: Helen with Caroline Anderson, Nicky Haire and their Rwandan Local Partners, 2010

HANNE METTE RIDDER

I met Helen Leith when she in 2010 participated in her first PhD course at the Doctoral Programme in Music Therapy in Aalborg. We started early Monday morning, and Helen was the last to present late Sunday afternoon after an intense week. Her presentation was titled: *Music Therapy and the Rehabilitation of Female Offenders with Mental Health Problems in Prison: Towards an Evidence-based Rationale*. I remember her very clear way of presenting her ideas and focus of a beginning research project. I also remember being impressed by her calm and straightforward way of juggling with complex topics and research concepts.

I thought that maybe being the last to present, after a week with several lectures and 19 other PhD students presenting their work had made the

nervousness disappear, or given her loads of ideas that she somehow managed to use to focus her own ideas. Normally, new PhD students would not be so competent in having a reflexive dialogue with the audience. After seeing Helen regularly for the next years, I realised that she simply just could dialogue and reflect like this. Not only when she presented her on-going research to expert guest professor and to the peer group of researchers, but also when we during courses had time off for bus trips, concerts, and dinners.

Helen studied music at Musikhochschule Detmold in Germany (a tiny spot that nobody knows, but funny enough very close to where my husband grew up). Back in the UK Helen earned her music therapy degree at Nordoff Robbins in London. In 2005, she went to Cyangugu in the southwest of Rwanda (a tiny spot, funny enough very close to where I grew up in Tanzania) where she initiated a music therapy project for children with disabilities, before she in 2008 started her work with women prisoners.

Thanks to Tony Wigram, Helen submitted an application to Aalborg, and was granted a mobility stipend. She was enrolled at a 75 % basis (i.e. four years instead of three) so she could keep her music therapy position at HMP Bronzefield and do the data collection for her research there as well. In her research, she explored self-perception and gave voice to 10 women prisoners who participated in individual music therapy session. She concluded that music therapy provided an appealing and motivating intervention, which served as an entry point to other programs required for resettlement.

When Helen realised that she needed chemo therapy, she planned her time schedule, so she could keep on with her research. She arranged with her partner, John Newman, and her supervisors, Helen Odell-Miller and Niels Hannibal, how best to attend PhD courses, so she could balance needs for rest with her impressive need to go on. She had to cancel one of the courses, but instead presented her almost finalised analysis on Skype for the whole group.

In September 2014, Helen submitted a preliminary version of the thesis. Her plan was to go through the final details “in the breaks” through yet another round of chemo. It came to be the final version. On the title page, the submission date is 31st of October, although her research was actually defended at a public viva on 26th of October 2014. Instead of a viva in Aalborg, the committee; Lars Ole Bonde, Gro Trondalen, and Lorraine Gelsthorpe, went to Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge. The Danish Ministry accepted the viva

to be carried out with only the committee and the supervisors present – but on the day, Helen managed to carry through a public viva with the presence of family, friends, colleagues and examiners. Once again I was impressed by her calm and straightforward way of juggling with complex topics and research concepts and the way she was having a highly interesting and qualified dialogue with the committee.

I feel very privileged to have met Helen, a unique person and a dedicated and inspiring researcher. She will be remembered by the team in Aalborg and her colleagues with warmth and thankfulness.

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