

# **Making A Difference: She's Healing Sick Kids One Song At A Time!**

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**Every child deserves to smile ... but for kids who are battling cancer, that isn't always easy. That's where Anita Kruse comes in, spreading light, love and hope – and erasing pain and fear – with music!**

*Music is the language of the spirit. It opens the secret of life, bringing peace. – Kahlil Gibran*

A kaleidoscope of lights dancing around her, the young girl stood in the recording studio, a microphone in one hand and her IV pole in the other. "I'm not sure about this," she said. "Just sing from your heart," Anita Kruse encouraged.

So as the Houston musician remixed a few chords, the girl nervously began reciting the lyrics she'd jotted down. And suddenly, she wasn't worrying about her blood counts. About losing her hair to chemotherapy. About anything ... except the rhythm of the music.

The first time Anita walked into Texas Children's Cancer Center, volunteering to play soft melodies to soothe the young patients undergoing treatment, she was impressed: It was so much brighter – cheerier – than she imagined a pediatric oncology ward could be.

Yet despite the sunlight flooding in and the playroom full of toys, there was no forgetting the kids there were fighting for their lives.

It just isn't fair! Anita sighed, seeing so many bald heads and frightened faces. They're only children. They should be going to ballet lessons and soccer practice, not stuck here being poked and prodded!

Still, whenever a mom pushed her child's wheelchair by and smiled or a little patient said, "Your music's pretty," Anita was touched. In some small way, she realized, she was making things a little less scary.

But Anita never stopped longing: I wish I could do more ...

## **Hope, healing and hits**

For years, Anita had given piano lessons. Sometimes she even helped children write and record their own songs.

"This is so cool!" they'd squeal when she handed them a CD with their name on it,

imagining themselves a rock star.

Every child deserves to know that joy and pride, Anita thought. And it struck her: That was exactly the kind of thing a child with cancer might enjoy! In fact, writing songs might even be helpful for them, she realized. Maybe it would be a way they could explore their emotions about their illness. Feel better about themselves. And escape their pain and fear, if only for a little while.

And when Anita proposed the idea to hospital administrators, they agreed. They even suggested a spot for a studio: a station of pay phones that went largely unused since so many people have cellphones now.

“You guys rock!” Anita marveled as they replaced the phones with electronic keyboards and recording equipment. And Anita herself painted the room a shade much like grape Popsicles. Purple, after all, was not only her “signature” hue, but the favorite of many children and said to be the color of imagination. So, hoping the studio – just down the hall from the chemo infusion rooms – would be a place where children could rise above their illnesses, Anita called her project “Purple Songs Can Fly” ([PurpleSongsCanFly.org](http://PurpleSongsCanFly.org)).

Soon, the children were arriving. Like eight-year-old Simran, who sang about her battle with bone cancer in “Always Remembering.” Stephen, 12, who poured his feelings about Hodgkin’s disease into a gospel song called “I Can Make It.” And Jalen Huckabay, a teen fighting lymphoma.

“I don’t really like singing,” the 16-year-old shrugged. But showing Anita pictures of her Yorkie, Jasmine, Jalen brightened.

“She does high-fives,” she said. “She sits. She twirls. If we let her hair grow, it curls!”

“That’s it!” Anita said, her pen flying across her notepad. “You just wrote the first verse!”

Later, as Anita added music tracks with a thumping bass and dog barking, Jalen started singing to “My Yippin’ Dog” – at first, barely audibly, then belting it out as her mom, Karen, watched, amazed.

“I’ve never seen her this ... giddy,” she told Anita. “How will I ever thank you!”

### **The power of music**

Jalen wasn’t the only one transformed. One teen had been curled up in a wheelchair, crying in pain. But after just a half-hour of songwriting, she stood up and began shimmying to her hip-hop song!

And, after years of enduring chemotherapy, young leukemia patient Mary Jo Stavinoha sighed to Anita, “Cancer isn’t fun, that’s for sure. But I know I’m lucky.” So the young

Texan proudly sang: “I’m an American cancer soldier/I’ve been through lots of shots, hospital stays/Difficult times along the way/It feels good to be a survivor!”

Today, Anita’s helped record nearly 150 tunes about everything from princesses to kittens to first love. And for these young songwriters, their works of art – with titles like “My Mom’s the Best Mom” and “God Can Move Mountains” – are amazing medicine.

“What Anita’s doing is making a tremendous difference,” confirms oncologist David Poplack, M.D. “Having this venue to express themselves has proven particularly helpful in these children’s recovery.”

And now, their “purple” songs truly are flying: They can be heard on Continental Airlines flights and have orbited Earth on the space shuttle twice! It’s a reminder, Anita says, to shoot for the stars, because nothing is impossible – even overcoming cancer.

Or, as survivor Alex Harkins – who was diagnosed with a liver tumor at age 1 – sings: Flying like an eagle ... I can howl at the moon/Soar in the wind/I can. I can. I *can!*”

“I always knew that music was powerful. But every day now it’s helping these children heal,” Anita beams. “And every moment I spend with them is exhilarating!”