

# Mrs. Z.

By Hayley Rieger, SPT

With one strum of a guitar, we were transported from our small treatment room to the hardwood floors of the Country Western bars of her past. In that moment, she transformed from a physically unbalanced and fearful 81-year-old patient to a young, lively cowgirl with hips that bounced smoothly to each musical beat. Within seconds of our initial encounter, I noticed something remarkable about this woman. It was in the way she carried herself—her brightly colored, well-adorned clothing and each new wig to match—where I realized how perfectly she embodied the first letter of her last name. Ms. Z was Zealous, Zippy, Zestful, and Zany. She was eccentrically unique yet powerful, decisive, and fierce, exactly like the sharply written edges of the letter Z.

## Living With Music

Music was significant to Ms. Z, so highly valued she even had a guitar etched into the corner of her light purple glasses. It was no surprise to learn that music was similarly etched into all aspects of her life. It connected her to family—from learning to play guitar the year her father passed away, to meeting her husband on the dance floor. Presently, she gathers with friends to share in the sweetness of instruments and camaraderie. She has even found a way to gain insights

into her personal spirituality through the lyrics of her songs.

Writing songs, singing, and dancing have helped Ms. Z make sense of a life muddled by doctor appointments, surgeries, prescription drugs, and long overnight stays at the hospital. As a breast cancer survivor, she boldly wears her pink ribbon daily, decorates her arm with a cream-colored compression sleeve, and has a closet full of hairpieces, all as a constant recognition of the endless battles she continues to endure. Nevertheless, with extraordinary determination and vibrancy, Ms. Z gracefully illustrates that she is more than the scars she carries, physically and metaphorically, on her chest.

## Healing With Harmony

Ms. Z was receiving physical therapy for the fall risk that tends to affect us as we age. Each day she would arrive—purses in both hands, shoulders rounded from adhered chest tissue—with a humble yearning to be known. Our time together grew to be structured around my learning of all her wonderful qualities. She sang about the musical adventures of her past, her youthful lusting over John Wayne, and the way music grounded her physically, allowing her to safely navigate the therapeutic interventions I created. Our mutual relationship of physical therapist and patient had us

waltzing down a road to improved mobility and independence with her humming, “Physical therapy is the highlight of my week.” This special woman taught me a lifelong lesson much deeper than what was found in all the piles and pages of my textbooks—that helping someone to reach their full potential means hearing the song in their heart and finding a way to sing it back.

## Finding the Music Inside

Physical therapy prides itself on the ability to optimize movement and function, but often falls short of acknowledging all the opportunities we have to know people on their personal journey toward recovery, and recognize how their souls shine through each diagnosis. This is precisely why I will never forget the

many zig-zags shared with this jazzy patient. While multiple moments continue to shine in my memories with her, one seems to zip to the top. During line dancing lessons at one treatment session, I made the casual observation, “Music really makes you move.” Without any pause in her two-stepping shoes, she passionately responded, “No, music *moves* me!”

In gratitude, I can now recognize that our performance as healthcare providers comes from drawing back the “stage curtains” to reveal the beautiful music inside all our patients. With an everlasting tune now playing in my head and heart, as I move on to provide continued individualized care, I will forever remember the time I was zapped by someone who brought a whole new meaning to the way we wrap up our American alphabet: Ms. Z.

## About the Author



*Hayley Rieger, SPT, will be graduating from Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska on May 12, 2018. Originally from the beautiful Pacific Northwest, she received her Bachelors in Psychology from Gonzaga University in Spokane, Washington. Following graduation, she plans to begin her physical therapy career back near the mountains and oceans of northwest Washington. Hayley believes that understanding the humanities is truly essential, as to her it means intentionally acknowledging every individual's unique humanness and the intricate connectivity that weaves us together through life. Guided by her passion of building relationships and serving others, she hopes to provide a future practice that recognizes all the many ways we can learn and grow in our journeys with one another.*



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