

Arts in Mind

Redwoods Drummers Connect Life's Rhythms

By Angela Barnett

"Rhythm is the soul of life. The whole universe revolves in rhythm. Everything and every human action revolves in rhythm." – Babatunde Olatunji – Nigerian-born drummer, recording artist, social activist, and educator.

Have you listened to the rhythm of life lately? Everything has a rhythm: walking, running, swinging, swimming, breathing, heartbeat. The rhythm of life is all around us. In music and the arts, the drum provides the tempo and rhythm of the song, the poem, or the dance.

Barbara Borden has tapped into that rhythm since the age of 5. Borden is a well-known local musician, artist, and educator. An early pioneer of women's drumming, Barbara has performed, recorded and collaborated with many artists, dancers, and authors, and has drummed for peace around the world. She plays over 40 different drums and percussion instruments, from the drum kit to the djembe. She has received educational and artistic grants for developing and facilitating her own clinics and drum council circles.

Barbara has also worked with a drumming circle at The Redwoods Retirement Community in Mill Valley for nearly 10 years. Most of the members in the group are residents of the Redwoods. Non-residents are also welcome. I was fortunate to attend a recent session.

Three Tuesdays a month the group takes out their Native American-style hoop drums and starts off with a steady rhythmic beat that encourages everyone to focus on the sounds and vibrations that emanate from the drum. Borden

incorporates chanting and breathing to quiet the mind and focus everyone's intentions. After a while, the body, breath, heart, and mind become integrated into the circle. "I want people to feel the rhythm directly through the body, through their souls, then through their minds," Borden said. It is not just the sound but the vibration of the drum that is most affecting as it resonates and pulses through the body. 'Pulse' is a common word that Barbara uses to describe the beat and the way it invokes commonality among people. "As a drummer, I am aware of the vibrations and energy in every moment of drumming. Singing creates a vibration from within the body while drumming brings vibration into the body. . . Everything in life pulsates at its own speed and intensity, thus creating particular vibrations in life," explains Borden.

Borden teaches a variety of rhythms from West Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and America. The group's drumming and singing create enlivening, uplifting celebrations of life. The group drums joyful learned songs such as 'When You're Smiling', as well as songs they write themselves. Thais Crowell, a 94-year-old resident of The Redwoods, is a frequent drum leader and circle facilitator. Crowell brought her own song to share called 'Hesitation.' "Each rhythm has a rest, when the sound is silent, and silence means a lot. A good musician knows when to use the silence," said Crowell. In the circle, everyone has a turn in the spotlight.

While sitting in the circle and drumming along, one can see and feel how a person can get 'hooked' on drumming. Barbara is the facilitator and teacher, but technically there is no single leader -- as the circle is a great equalizer. You are the performer and the audience. The emotion conveyed in drumming is honest and raw. The beat is recognizable and familiar. The freedom to feel the pulse and the immediate response of the drum and the audience can be infectious.

Through time, the drum has been a messenger for many cultures and countries. "Drumming is a primal language - it connects all of us. We all have a heartbeat, a rhythmic connection," said Borden. In much of West Africa, spoken and drummed languages do not exist in written form, so stories, rhythms and songs were passed on through human connection and in the oral tradition. Borden uses these same methods of teaching through experience, song and movement. The drum is also still widely used for spiritual ceremonies and rituals. Drumming has brought a new way to converse, communicate and connect. Borden said, "The drummers learned to approach each other and to be patient with each other over time. They learned a new communication through the drum that cuts

through the words that can get in the way." Crowell added, "When I am drumming I feel a great sense of unity with everything around me."

Emily Kuenstler, Program Coordinator for The Redwoods, also offered this perspective, "Young or old, if someone needs a boost, a creative hobby provides emotional release, strengthens self-esteem, and provides a sense of accomplishment and hope. The arts inspire people the same way beauty in nature does; they remind us of a more spiritual beauty, an inner beauty which is ageless!"

Anyone can pick up a drum, create some music, and reignite the pulse within. There is no musical background required. Drumming and music awaken that connection to the spirit that can get lost after many years of following calendars, deadlines and schedules. The circadian clock is the original clock that resonates with all life and that every person is attuned to. Tap out a beat and feel the rhythm that is already inside each of us. Reconnect and rejoice to the beat, the rhythm, the pulse, the music of all community and life.

Barbara Borden is the subject of a documentary film-in-progress, "Keeper of the Beat", by Emmy-Award winning filmmaker, David L. Brown. On Thursday, October 4, Tamalpais Bank, in Mill Valley, is hosting a fundraiser. There will be live music by Mill Valley's "Ozone", a rock band directed by Derek Kudrow that includes The Redwoods Drummers, and Barbara Borden and Friends. For information contact Paul Barenfus, 415-526-6521, or go to: www.bbbeat.com.

The Redwoods Drummers have performed for the Council on Aging and in Mill Valley's Memorial Day Parade, among other venues over the years. They hope someday to appear on "The Oprah Winfrey Show". For more information on the Drummers or the Redwoods Retirement Community, see: www.theredwoods.org.

"Arts in Mind" is a series from Kiddo! that explores arts and arts education.

Angela Barnett is a writer and a parent in the Mill Valley School District.