

## Meet Nikki Belshe of Heart & Harmony Music Therapy



# Nikki Belshe

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Today  
we'd  
like  
to  
introduce  
you  
to  
**Nikki  
Belshe**

**Nikki, let's start with your story. We'd love to hear how you got started and how the journey has been so far.**

When I moved off to college I had no idea that the words music and therapy could even pair together. Initially, on scholarship as a music education major, I had a change of heart just a few weeks in. I began looking into social work or some sort of humanities when I heard about music therapy. Fortunately, I was at Sam Houston State University, one of 5 universities in Texas to offer degrees in music therapy.

The director of the program, Karen Miller, met with me and encouraged me to take her Intro (to Music Therapy) course and see if it was a good fit. I sat down and read the entire textbook in just a few days! I couldn't get enough of it, and really, still can't.

My late husband David was also a music therapist. We moved to Fort Worth for 2 separate music therapy positions in 2009. It was a blessing in disguise that both positions fell through after the move because that's how we got started. We began contracting with local agencies just to make ends meet. We stumbled into private practice and made rookie mistakes early on. We eventually became official business partners, started training students and interns, founded an LLC, and added team members who share our passions and vision.

Heart and Harmony is now a team of 9 therapists serving a variety of populations and settings – from children with







autism to adults in mental health settings to seniors in skilled nursing facilities. We conduct sessions in client homes and facilities from Dallas to Brock to Southlake to Granbury.

**Great, so let's dig a little deeper into the story – has it been an easy path overall and if not, what were the challenges you've had to overcome?**

Most people reading this interview have probably never heard of music therapy until now. That is a huge challenge for our practice, and for our entire profession; advocacy.

We spend a lot of time and energy educating the public about what music therapy is and what it isn't. We keep very detailed notes and records of therapy visits and write reports to justify our services over and over again. It's all for good reason; all evidence-based therapists take data, track progress, and justify their efficacy, from PTs to OTs to SLPs. But us MT-BCs have an uphill battle from the get-go because of an awareness gap. Advocacy is crucial.

Here's my quick elevator speech:

Music therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music to facilitate improvement in cognitive, communication, social, emotional, or motor skill areas. It can look so many ways, from discussing lyrics to a Katy Perry song in order to identify healthy coping skills to extending legs to kick a drum. Some clients write songs to express autonomy, some learn songs to support completing ADLs (Activity of Daily Living like making a bed or brushing teeth), yet others play recorder to improve breath control, and some of our clients learn piano or guitar to improve finger dexterity. Music therapists are trained to use motivating and client-preferred music to facilitate progress.

We work in schools, hospitals, hospice care, and home health, just to name a few.

And yes, my job is just as fun as it sounds.

**Heart and Harmony Music Therapy – what should we know? What do you guys do best? What sets you apart from the competition?**

Because some of the Medicaid waivers in Texas fund music therapy, there's quite a bit of contract work all over the state. Dozens if not hundreds of music therapists fill this need in Texas, but there is a loneliness that accompanies working in the home health setting.

Many therapists drive solo from client to client, spending hours in their car each day and having no direct supervision and no coworkers. We wanted to alleviate some of the frustrations that come from being solitary.

At Heart and Harmony, we try our best to foster a team environment. Our therapists have the opportunity to supervise practicum students and interns, share ideas with teammates, and meet up for song swaps and social functions. Heart and Harmony has also hosted several client concerts and social functions, giving opportunities for our clients to meet one another and create new relationships. We value community and strive to offer it to both our clients and our therapists.

**What moment in your career do you look back most fondly on?**

Over the years we have celebrated all kinds of victories with many of our clients: learning to produce speech, using sign-language to request instruments, writing songs entirely with eye-contact.

We've worked for 9 years with one young woman with traumatic brain injury, and she has mastered guitar, ukulele, and is now learning piano. Her self-confidence is soaring and she's now in college! We celebrate the little things and big things and everything in between.

We are proud of our clients, but I'd be remiss if I didn't mention our hard-working interns. All music therapists complete a degree, a 1200 hour internship, and sit for a national board certification exam.

Since 2012, Heart and Harmony has trained 13 interns. There's something really beautiful about watching students develop into competent, compassionate professionals, and we are so thankful for all that our interns have taught us.