

Moms make music to motivate kids

BY CYNTHIA HENDERSON

Special needs experts have known for a long time about the benefits of music for children with a variety of disorders. It can be soothing, instructive and help in the development of language. But no one had to tell Long Island resident Michele Purcell, a songwriter, musician and mother of two children with autism, that when she sang or played music for her kids, it helped to calm them down and focus on the task at hand.

About a year ago, Michele, who had worked in production for the BMG record company before having children (Marc, 8, and Daniel, 6), came up with the idea to create a CD to help other mothers motivate their kids to get through their daily routine.

"I thought that if I could get my kids to respond to the music, maybe other kids would respond, too," she says.

Joining Forces

With encouragement from an autism consultant, Michele placed an online ad on Craigslist for a lyricist and found a kindred spirit in Barbara Fine Buxbaum, a writer and mother of two. They came up with the ideas for specific songs by sharing their experiences and frustrations as mothers through e-mails and phone conversations.

"We clicked instantly," recalls Michelle. "I never had any doubt that Barbara knew exactly what I meant."

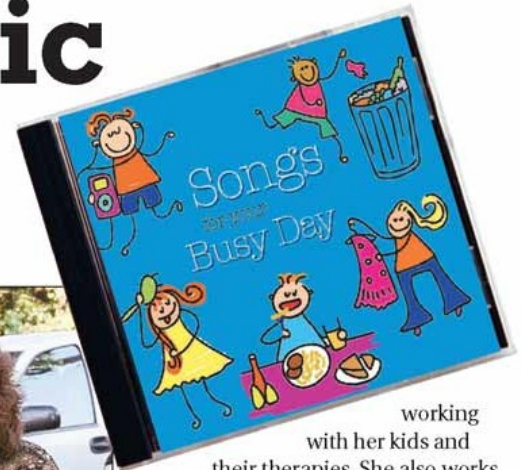
In some cases, Michele made a recording of the music she had in mind for a song and mailed it to Barbara. In return, Barbara e-mailed back the lyrics she came up with. Other songs were created first by a lyrical line or chorus from Barbara



Barbara Fine Buxbaum and Michele Purcell performing at the Mill Neck Apple Festival.

that Michele accompanied to music. At times, with Michele on keyboards, they sang to each other over the phone. Songs were written at night after the children were all in bed or during the day when they were at school. Recording and production costs were covered using their own money and a loan from Michele's parents, while relatives, friends and husbands cared for the kids to give the two women time in the recording studio.

The entire project took a little more than a year to complete and "Songs for Your Busy Day" from MusicbyMommies, Inc. was released in December. It is available on cdbaby.com, iTunes.com, Amazon.com and through Michele and Barbara's Web site, musicbymommies.com. The eight-song CD covers in detail everything from getting up in the morning and getting dressed to getting out the door and into the car, eating, taking a bath, cleaning up, brushing teeth and going to sleep. The music is a fun mixture of folk, pop and jazz and the lyrics are catchy, repetitive and easy to follow.



working with her kids and their therapies. She also works part-time transcribing medical notes and plays music monthly at a local restaurant/bar.

"Music has always been a way for me to forget about my problems for a while," she says, "but this also made me feel good because I thought I might be helping other people. And now that the CD is out, I feel like I've actually accomplished something for myself over this last year."

In addition, Michelle found that her children benefited developmentally from being involved with the project. Her younger son, Daniel, for instance, had severely delayed speech. After singing background vocals with the other children on *Let's Take a Bath*, Daniel announced, "That's me singing. I did that at the studio with Mommy."

"That was an incredibly big sentence for him," she says, adding that when she hears that song now, it just makes her feel happy to think about it.

With the CD finished, Michele takes long walks with her dog, Theo, to clear her mind. But that doesn't mean she's finished with music. She and Barbara have plans to make other CDs that deal with emotions, manners and listening skills. The pair also plan to perform their music at schools, fairs and libraries. Down the road, Michele hopes to put all she has learned from her children and her music to work as a music therapist.

"I found that my kids learn best if the music is simple and if they can repeat stuff," Michele says.

Barbara agrees. Her own children, Joshua, 6, and Maya, 4, do not have special needs, but she says, "I think all mothers have trouble getting their kids to cooperate all of the time. I've found that the songs are a fun way of getting my kids to do what I want. When we sing them, it feels like it's something we are all doing together."

Feedback

The two moms test-marketed "Songs for Your Busy Day" by distributing copies to teachers and friends in their communities. The feedback has been positive. "Some teachers have liked the CDs so much that they have built activities around some of the songs," reports Barbara.

Making the CD has been a particularly rewarding experience for Michele because it has given her a creative outlet to relieve the stress and worries of day-to-day life. Like most mothers of special-needs kids, much of Michele's time is spent

Cynthia Henderson is a writer, mother and The Parent Paper's columnist for special needs. You can contact Cynthia