‘An Evening of Health, Wellness and the Arts’

Pianist Robin Spielberg to share her experiences with the power of music

JOHNSON CITY – While many performers let their art do the talking, Steinway artist and composer Robin Spielberg doesn’t mind sharing, even baring, her soul to her audiences. And while her story – and new memoir *Naked on the Bench: My Adventures in Pianoland* – is very much about her life and livelihood at the piano, it is also indelibly intertwined with health and the healing power of music.

That is why Spielberg, a celebrity spokesperson for the American Music Therapy Association, will be guest speaker and performer for East Tennessee State University’s fourth annual Evening of Health, Wellness and the Arts on Thursday, March 5, at 7 p.m. in the D.P. Culp University Center’s Martha Street Culp Auditorium.

Her free public “informance” is titled “The Transformative Power of Music: The Medical Benefits of Music – An Enchanting Evening of Piano and Tales from the Bench.” A reception and meet-and-greet with Spielberg will precede the event, from 6-6:45 p.m.

“Each year that we’ve done this, we’ve looked for someone from one of the performing arts, who, either through their art or their own lives, also engages in some activity related to health and wellness,” says Dr. Randy Wykoff, dean of the College of Public Health, which is co-sponsoring the event with the Mary B. Martin School of the Arts. “And Robin is obviously a very accomplished pianist and composer, but also has spoken about the therapeutic benefits of music.

“We’ve had an actor, we’ve had a magician, we’ve had a Cherokee historian and storyteller, and we’ve had a filmmaker, so it seems natural to look for someone like Robin who touches both worlds so well.”

Spielberg is an artist the Martin School of the Arts has been following for some years, says Director Anita DeAngelis, and this spring, the time was right.

“It’s interesting to have an artist come here and talk about their own very, very personal story,” DeAngelis says. “She will share with us how that’s impacted her career and how she is using music now, not only as a vehicle for entertainment, but as a vehicle to help improve health, as well.”

The arts were always a helpful and healthful activity for Spielberg, an “anxious kind of child, a worrier,” who started playing piano as a toddler and taking lessons by age 7. Harboring dreams of Broadway, Spielberg first pursued drama, but found her side job as a pianist moved audiences more. There her story took a new turn
– and a new twist when her daughter, now 16, was born 16 weeks early and was not expected to be able to walk, talk, see, hear or speak.

“The NICU, the neo-natal intensive care unit, was so loud and so disruptive … not what you want for babies who are trying to heal,” Spielberg says. “I asked permission from the nurses if we could play some music by my daughter’s incubator … and over a period of time that the music was playing, they noticed that my daughter’s vitals improved. They saw that her oxygen saturation levels increased and they saw that her breathing stabilized – and it wasn’t just our daughter. It helped babies that were in earshot of the music.”

Spielberg began researching the field of music therapy. Her daughter thrived and so did Spielberg’s career and interest in the transforming power of music. Her first recording of original solos was called “Heal of the Hand.”

Since then, she has shared her stories of healing, as well as her own soothing music, and has become known worldwide for her sensitive compositions and “comforting piano artistry.”

“From the moment she walks on stage, until the last note gently caresses the room, Spielberg casts a spell on her audience that is palpable, visceral, and spiritual,” says Bruce Bressack of HippoPress. “After you see her perform, you’ll just feel a whole lot better about the world.”

Although Spielberg has performed at Carnegie Hall three times, she chooses to play wherever she can make “connections.”

“It’s not about all the money I make, or how many records I sell,” she says. “It’s not about that stuff. It’s more about connections.”

She performs on college campuses and in hospitals, nursing homes, retirement centers, jails, juvenile delinquent centers and for young people with special needs. “I’ll play wherever they will have me,” she says. “There are a lot of ways to connect, and I’m interested in all of them.”

“You might not find out something new about me, but maybe you will find out something new about you,” Spielberg says. “I don’t mean to be mysterious by saying that. This is the kind of concert that is not about me. These informances are a time to connect and a time to reflect and a time to look at things in a different way. It is an opportunity to discover how they can use this information or the music that they heard to make a change in their own life.”

Spielberg has already spurred ETSU students to create their own stories through the arts.

Public Health and the Gold Humanism Honor Society from the James H. Quillen College of Medicine, who are also event co-sponsors, have prepared an exhibition spurred by the pianist’s openness and therapeutic interests.

“The Gold Humanism Art exhibit that will be in the lobby was inspired by the talented work of Spielberg and her TED talk last year in which she discussed the incredible healing power of music,” says Alissa Hinkle, medical student and president of the Gold Humanism Honor Society. “For the exhibit, we expanded the theme to ‘Art in Medicine’ to include those of our medical student body who are very talented painters.

“We hope this exhibit will encourage our community to find the power of music and art in their own lives and then to teach others to do the same.”

ETSU music students will also benefit from Spielberg’s willingness to share her experiences and wisdom. She will work with piano students on overcoming performance anxiety Wednesday, March 4, at 12:35 p.m. in 107 Mathes Hall. The workshop is free and open to auditors and spectators.

For more information on Spielberg, visit www.robinspielberg.com.

For more information on the concert, call the Martin School of the Arts at 423-439-TKTS (8587) or visit www.etsu.edu/martin. For disability accommodations, call the Office of Disability Services at 423-439-8346.

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