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Carolers offer songs of joy with new voices at Baylor All Saints

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The carolers' voices were hoarse and at times hard to understand, but to the nurses and physicians who once treated them, *Jingle Bells* never sounded sweeter.

"For us to see them back to living life and looking like this, well, it's just amazing," said nurse Courtney Lindahan as she wiped away tears.

For the laryngeal cancer survivors who gathered in the ICU of Baylor All Saints Medical Center at Fort Worth to sing Christmas carols, this was a gift that they could have never imagined giving, after surgery left them without voices.

When the idea of forming a chorus came up at a North Texas Laryngectomy Society meeting, it stunned John Robinson, who was diagnosed with cancer two years ago.

"I was sure I couldn't do it," he said.

With no pitch and only gravelly voices created through the wonders of technology, it just didn't make sense to the 67-year-old Bridgeport retiree. But he agreed to give it a shot anyway as a way to thank his medical team.

"All of us together as a group kind of make it work," he said. "And it has made us all feel better about ourselves."

The idea of a chorus made up of larynx cancer survivors came up after Katrina Jensen, a medical speech pathologist, saw a news clip of a similar choir in Croatia.

Although the support group was leery of the idea at first, she convinced them that it was worth a try, said Jensen, who works with Otolaryngology & Facial Plastic Surgery Associates in Fort Worth.

Singing in a choir is not only therapeutic but inspirational, Jensen said.

Music is a way to help them learn how to change pitch and sustain a note, challenges made all the more difficult with no voice box. It also helps them forget about how their voices sound or whether people can understand them.

"They focus on singing the song," Jensen said. "Then suddenly they realize they are producing a good voice."

To hear Theresa Mowery sing, it's hard to imagine that just seven months ago she had her voice box removed after being diagnosed with cancer.

"I used to sing the blues," said the Azle resident, who performed in area clubs. "When I lost my voice, it was like half of me went with it -- I thought it was all over for me."

Depressed, she hated to go in public because she felt everyone was staring at her. Singing and leading the choir turned things around for her.

"It's another beginning," she said. "I have to look at it that way."

For the 12,740 people who were diagnosed with laryngeal cancer this year in the United States, treatment is demanding and life-changing. Patients often undergo extensive surgery, followed by radiation.

Patients wake up from surgery unable to talk, and they have to breathe through a hole in their neck for the rest of their lives, said Briana Moss, head and neck coordinator at Baylor All Saints.

It's common to get depressed after such a traumatic surgery.

"It's such a downer to have your vocal cords removed and then not be able to talk like you have for 50 years," said Robinson, who believes a 40-year smoking habit caused his cancer. "You feel like a freak."

Although they cannot talk for several weeks after surgery, eventually patients learn to speak with the help of an implantable voice prosthetic.

Advances in technology have made it possible for laryngectomy patients to speak with a voice that sounds more natural and unique, Moss said. But it is not without limitations.

"They still sound winded when they speak and the words are more forced," Moss said. "It takes about a year to get to the point where they are really talking."

Robinson said he was so desperate to communicate again that within a week of getting his prosthetic he started talking. But it wasn't easy.

"Your brain works OK," he said. "But the voice that comes out doesn't sound real good."

Even if their carols were a bit gravelly, the group never has sounded better to its audience.

"It was the best Christmas present we ever got," said Diane Wright, a nurse at Baylor All Saints.

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