

INSPIRING WOMEN

*Who Would Have
Thought?*



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Playing Music, Hearing a New Song

Heather O'Donnell, a member of AIWC Cologne and AIWC Düsseldorf, was a concert pianist until chronic pain forced her to pivot her passion to helping others.



Heather O'Donnell, psychological counselor.

I grew up in a suburb of New York City. When I was six, I started studying with an incredibly inspiring pianist, Charles Milgrim. He gave me an insight into a world completely different from the suburban life I was otherwise living. I'll never forget the day he brought a score of J.S. Bach to our lesson, ceremoniously placed it on the piano, and indicated that life would never be the same after diving into this miraculous music. Although he could be a bit scary to my smaller self, he was also tender-hearted and would occasionally tear-up when he heard or spoke about the music of Chopin or Schumann. I worked with him twice a week for over 90 minutes for several years and regard him as a second father. He was inspiring, demanding, loving and a beautiful model for living a musician's life.

After leaving home

After studies, I began working as a musician, moved for a year to Paris, then back to New York, right after 9/11. That was such a strange year, I decided to get the hell out of there and move to Berlin with my husband. We stayed in Berlin for 13 years. I had a good and challenging career as a musician based in Berlin until 2010. During that time I played solo concerts and worked as an ensemble musician throughout the world. Some memorable concerts were in Moscow in October 2002 during a hostage stand-off (luckily the theater I was in was not affected, but the

Heather at the piano, as a child of six in 1979.



Heather's last concert as a professional musician: at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin, 2010.

director of my theater was constantly on the phone with musicians in the occupied theater); concerts and masterclasses in China; a series of benefit concerts in Jordan; collaborations with dancers in Hungary and France; and many many more wonderful experiences.

Life changes

In the latter stages of my career, hand and arm injuries intensified and became chronic, making it difficult for me to continue working as a musician. Pain was almost always present while playing, and what had been a supremely enjoyable activity (daily work at the piano) became an enormous burden. After years of visits to so many doctors and various therapists, I decided that the only sensible thing left to do was to leave my professional work as a musician behind and start another course

of study. I went back to school at age 37 as a bachelor's degree student at the Freie Universität in Berlin. It was really an exercise in "Beginner's Mind" because all the skills and accolades I may have collected in my life as a musician had very little weight there. I had to get tutored by a 19 year old who was a statistics wizard, since I was god-awful at statistics. It was an exercise in humility as I limped through very difficult courses in psychology, experimental design, statistics and probability.

After completing my bachelors degree, we decided to move back to the USA in 2015. My husband and I both worked at the Eastman School of Music for four years, but decided during those tumultuous years in the USA that Germany would be a better environment for us to raise our daughter. We moved to Düsseldorf in 2019. In 2020 I founded a center supporting

performing artists: TGR The Green Room in Cologne-Nippes.

Involvement in your "new profession"

My calling now is to assist performing artists as a psychological counselor and director of a center dedicated to artists' holistic health. I find this work enormously gratifying. Since March of 2022, we have focused on helping Ukrainian performers find their foothold in Germany. The relationships formed with Ukrainian artists and Russian dissident artists have been inspiring. My work in this field was precipitated by a difficult experience (chronic injury and the loss of my initial life trajectory), but I am so grateful to have found an outlet for those experiences, especially if it eases the difficulties for others experiencing similar things.



Training and education

I went back to school and started from the beginning, as a undergraduate student, and eventually got my master's degree in Health and Prevention Psychology. I'm currently working towards becoming a Systemic Arts Therapist. In my "second-life" training, I really missed having intensive mentorship relationships. When you study music, so often your primary teacher plays an essential role in your development. There was not any equivalent to this in my new studies, but I did draw on the help of other students: especially older women. We called ourselves the *Alte Geiste* (Old Souls) and were a group of bachelor's degree students in our 30s and 40s who had previously done something else: a former midwife, a photographer, a film director, an actress, etc.

Taking it to the next level

The first step was to just give up and admit defeat. I had been clinging onto my old role as a pianist for many years because it provided a framework for my core identity, and it was very scary to leave this behind. But my body was screaming at me: "Stop with this! I can't do it any longer!" So, I had no choice. For many years there was a difficult process of finding out who I was, without the cloak of a musician to hide behind. Although the process was difficult and painful, I'm so glad I went through it. No one is "just" a musician, or "just" anything for that matter, and I'm glad I got to know myself independent from that highly entrenched and very fixed source of identity. My new profession is quite challenging. There are very few psychologists specialized in work with performing artists, and even fewer centers devoted to the mission of

assisting performers. This means that the professional work often needs to be carved out "of nothing." There are few precedents. There's a strong need to justify the urgency of this work in attracting funding from people (many times people from the financial, policy and banking sectors) who believe that the performer's life is just a dream-come-true, or a charmed exercise in turning a hobby into a profession. It's a challenge to let people know about the dangers and risks associated with the professional lives of performing artists. Since I began intensively working with refugee Ukrainian artists and dissident Russian artists following the outbreak of the war, I sense possibilities for a wider contribution. Unfortunately, the world currently appears to be headed for greater social instability and forced migration. Artists often occupy public and exposed platforms, in which any statements they make critical of the oppressive regimes might lead to dangerous personal and professional situations. I believe that a large part of my work in the future will be devoted to helping refugee and dissident performing artists settle into Germany and begin their professional lives here.

Biggest challenges

The biggest challenge was trying to figure out how to start again in mid-life without being a huge burden on my family. My earnings as a musician certainly weren't making us wealthy, but they were part of our family's financial organization. When I had to quit in 2010, I switched over to teaching piano while studying psychology. Teaching is a profession I greatly admire but unfortunately feel I'm not that good at. There were quite a few moments where I feared I was putting my family at risk by shaking my life up. Luckily, the adage "where there's a will, there's a way" proved true. And there wasn't just a will, but a sense of necessity – I couldn't keep up my professional tasks as a musician. The other jump into the unknown was in 2019 when we moved from the USA to Düsseldorf. I left a decent job as an adjunct professor in a music conservatory. Starting The Green Room was a big gamble, especially because we opened in October of 2020 and had to lock down because of the pandemic from November until the following June. The work at TGR has been enormously meaningful and enriching, but still not very helpful in contributing to our family's financial wellbeing. I currently have some major grant applications out that I hope will help solidify the financial security of the organization by providing a regular salary.

What the future holds

As I mentioned before, I'm currently applying for a grant funded by the European Commission that I intensely hope will come through. This grant would enable The Green Room to be a center that could provide artist residencies for refugee and dissident artists from around the world. These artists would be integrated into the already existing infrastructure of The Green Room, and it would be a fantastic expansion of our mission in supporting artists. If this works, we will start in April of 2023 with the program *TGR Künstlerhafen* (i.e. TGR Artists' Safe Harbor). We would partner with the wonderful Finnish organization "Artists-at-Risk" which could help with the process of identifying artists who would fit into this model well, and with issues like visa acquisition and initial travel. Please keep your fingers crossed.

A typical day

My daily schedule varies greatly. There's a lot of administrative work to take care of – emails, scheduling, the nitty-gritty of running an organization, but I also have clients, meetings with partners and collaborators, and if I'm lucky, I can practice the piano a little and read. I'm looking forward to a day when I can expand my administrative team from one person (me) to more people to share the responsibilities of running The Green Room and provide input and inspiration for the future path of the organization.

Childhood story that best explains the person you are today

When I started 1st grade, I came home with a picture I had drawn with three scrawled words underneath: "I can run." My mom thought the picture was funny, because I had the most grim, most stubborn expression on my stick-figure face. She framed it, and it has been a symbol for my stubbornness

Heather speaking in the Green Room, a center for performing artists.

and determination ever since. This stubbornness got me into trouble: I didn't listen to my body's signals, so I really got injured as a pianist, and sometimes I wonder if I shouldn't step back from projects I'm deep into and take a breather and get some perspective.

Something you love now, that you never could have imagined you would like

I love knitting. I can't practice the piano for very long now, because the pain signals tend to come back after c. 60 minutes. Knitting gives me something wonderful for my fingers to do. It's a huge stress reliever, and I'm torturing my family with one homemade sweater after another at Christmas time.

The wildest thing I have ever done is ...

... move with my husband to Berlin in 2002. We had no idea how we would support ourselves. My first job was as a house cleaner and I quickly got fired because I had no idea how to do that job well. That was a rough year, but we pulled through and got integrated fairly quickly into the legendary music scene in Berlin.

One thing you would change about yourself

I would learn to relax and enjoy life more. I've been doing a lot of meditation since 2016, but the "art of living" is still elusive ... I like working, and I finally like the work I'm doing. I hope that the second half of my life will have more space for enjoying this beautiful earth we inhabit.

