

Nestled in a bustling corner of Texas Children's Hospital in Houston, an 8-year-old little girl grips a poem jotted down on a piece of notebook paper. She is undergoing chemotherapy for Ewing's sarcoma, a bone cancer, and waiting patiently with a smile.

A soft-spoken, vivacious blond woman rolls in a desk holding a microphone and a computer monitor. Anita Kruse explains to the little girl that she is the founder of a non-profit organization called Purple Songs Can Fly, and that she is there to help her write and record her very own song.

The girl unfolds her crumpled piece of notebook paper, and after a few hours of working together, they meticulously craft the first song of many purple songs to come.

"The first lines of her song were 'some bird soaring through the sky, imagination in its head, moving with the wind, running off to its excitement, always remembering, never getting lost,'" Kruse said. "It just seemed like everything came together, because my program was about a flight of the spirit. That's when I knew everything was going to work out."

Purple Songs Can Fly has been touching lives in the cancer center since 2006 with over 3,000 songs written and recorded in the program's professional studio. The space provides pediatric cancer patients with a creative outlet, allowing them to share their work with loved ones as each song is burned onto a purple CD. Then, the songs actually do fly as participating pilots and astronauts take the children's CDs to space and to places all over the world.

"An astronaut named Scott Parazynski took close to 50 songs from the first year on a compilation CD up into space," Kruse said. "Then, he ended up coming back to the cancer center and sharing a film of his mission and meeting with the kids who'd had their songs taken into space."

Kruse first came up with the idea for Purple Songs Can Fly as a visiting artist in the cancer center. Before personally raising money to fund the start of the program, she sang with the accompaniment of a flutist at the hospital and also taught music lessons from a studio in her home.

"It just seemed like every time I was there, I had an experience that was really moving," Kruse said. "A picture dropped into my brain of my studio that I had at home, physically in the cancer center, where I could do this with children that were there."

The program is the first of its kind, but it has inspired the creation of similar models across the country. Child life specialist at Texas Children's Hospital, Dana Swan, said she believes that it

has brought hope to many children and acts as a “medical distraction” by taking the patient away from the seriousness of the hospital.

“I think that by making the journey a little better, filled with toys or music, gives patients an outlet to express some of their emotions and things that they’re dealing with,” Swan said. “That, in turn, helps it become a more positive experience for them so they’re able to have as normal of a childhood as possible, despite being in the hospital and going through the treatment.”

Swan said that she believes cancer is an attacker that fights more than just the patient, but the child’s support system as well. This is one of the main reasons why Kruse also invites siblings and parents to be a part of the process and record.

“I think it helps the family, because it brings everyone together in a different way, where the sibling is a part of the process,” Kruse said. “I’ve also had parents that have been in the room when the song was made, feeling uplifted and moved that their child created something that they’ve never heard them do before.”

As Purple Songs Can Fly has developed, Kruse has pulled many strings to shed light on each patient’s battle. Some of the tracks have not only flown, but have travelled on an underwater submarine mission, a tour with the Rolling Stones and a climb to summit Mt. Everest. Mia Spargo, who was diagnosed with brain cancer when she was 6 years old, was able to nurture her passion of acting and singing by performing her songs with the organization’s live-action play called “Journey to Hope.”

“Anita gathered a few patients and our songs and made a play,” Spargo said. “I think the music and the friendship that we had, and just knowing what we’ve been through gave us a sense of bravery. I always get some sense of nervousness or shyness in front of crowds, but once I’m on stage and start singing and performing, it all goes away.”

Spargo has written about 14 songs through Purple Songs Can Fly. She said that Kruse helped her step out of her shell and find a new passion for music.

“I ended up writing my first song from just a few words,” Spargo said. “It was Christmas time, and my voice was so weak, but it was called ‘The Angels Come Sometimes,’ and it meant a lot to me because I didn’t know that I could write my own song. I just kind of fell in love with music since then.”

Kruse continues to mentor patients through Purple Songs Can Fly so more patients like Spargo can flourish during difficult times in their recovery. Spargo is still undergoing treatments as a

senior in high school. She plans to make a difference by studying pediatric cancer care to become a child life specialist.

“To be able to see these children grow up and to be able to create something for families that have lost a child has been this full spectrum of having a deeper appreciation of my own life and the difficulties that other human beings go through,” Kruse said. “It's a profound thing to be able to see them use creativity to give them strength.”