



the anatomy of art in medicine

The Shands Arts in Medicine Program provides hope and healing for a variety of patients through different art forms.

BY: SAMANTHA DEAN AND MEGHAN PRYCE

Cathy DeWitt was constantly playing with her fingers, as if they were itching to create something beautiful.

Tammy Bernard had a way of closing her eyes, like she needed to meditate on every word.

It's no wonder these two women found their way to the Arts in Medicine program at Shands at UF.

The program, which began in 1990, uses integrative medicine and visual, literary, contemplative and performance arts to help patients and their families.

The idea isn't special to Shands, but it is one of the few hospitals to incorporate alternative practices into patient care. In fact, it's one of the only major hospitals in Florida to have such a program.

DeWitt has been with the Arts in Medicine program since almost the very start. She has been an artist in the Gainesville community for 30 years, and, as Arts in Medicine was first getting its start, she was looking for a new way to interact artistically with her community.

She said Mary Lisa Katakis-Spano, the program's visual artist coordinator, reeled her in at the conception.

"I'm the kind of person that faints when they prick your finger to take you blood," she said.

Still, she returned after seeing the impact her art had on the patients. She would enter the activity rooms and play music for them.

"There were kids dancing around with their IV poles," she said.

Eventually, the program expanded and was able to purchase a piano for the lobby. One patient immediately responded to the music floating through the hallways. He would request DeWitt to play "It Had to Be You," that soulful Sinatra ballad, every time he walked by.

"This piano makes this lobby a happy place," he would tell her.

Another patient only wanted Christmas carols. She was a psychologist who woke from a six-month coma, DeWitt said. Her favorite music was Christmas carols, so they had Christmas in July. Music helped to heal her, especially communicatively.

DeWitt said this patient made her realize how important art can be to the brain.

"Music becomes a powerful tool for communication," she said.

Working with sick patients can take its toll, though. She said everyone in the program has that place in the hospital that's particularly difficult for them, and DeWitt's is the burn unit.

Some situations still make her cry, she said, but she doesn't do that in the hospital or in front of patients and their loved ones.

"The arts are important," she said. "They're not a luxury. I get to see the difference a song can make."

Unless that's what she thinks they need.

"Some just need someone to cry with them," she said.

Seeing patients and their families in pain is never easy for DeWitt, but she feels a sense of purpose in her craft.

"My responsibility is to make music a positive experience for people in some way," she said.

Some patients stay with her through time, even if just in memory. DeWitt recalled one patient whose mother left an impact. Sonia Bando was in the hospital with her son, David, who needed a heart transplant. David was about 18 years old at the time, and he was in the hospital for a couple of months. When Sonia heard DeWitt's music from the next room, she wanted to join in. She had been a member of the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir and wanted to lend her voice. After David had his surgery, he and his mother came back to volunteer with the Arts in Medicine program and sing for the patients.

David died a few years later at the age of 27, and Sonia moved away soon after, but DeWitt said she has stayed in contact through the years, receiving a Christmas card every year since.

This theme of impactful moments is nothing

new to DeWitt. Nurses comment all the time on patients' vitals changing as the music plays. DeWitt remembered a premature baby boy in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit whose heart rate and vital signs began to drop from abnormally high as she strummed a harp and hummed a melody for him.

"It's a change that's measurable," she said. The positive effects of the Arts in Medicine program is an ongoing debate, but DeWitt said moments like that show they have proven themselves.

"The arts are important," she said. "They're not a luxury. I get to see the difference a song can make."

DeWitt said she feels blessed to be in a setting where she can impact people in their most vulnerable state and possibly help them.

"I get something out of every experience," she said. "I live for these amazing moments."

Tammy Bernard feels this same sense of purpose.

"I feel deeply honored and privileged to do this work and be in the presence of so much courage and goodness that I see," she said.

Bernard is the yoga program coordinator for Arts in Medicine. She started off volunteering with Shands in 2008 to teach

"There were kids dancing around with their IV poles."



lunchtime yoga classes to the medical staff there and later, in 2010, joined the Arts in Medicine program in 2010 when the Shands at UF Cancer Center opened.

Now, Bernard's classes are geared toward the patients. She teaches chair yoga twice a week in the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit and once a week on the general oncology floor. Sometimes, she's requested for bedside yoga exercises. Bernard was born two months premature and is no stranger to spending time in hospitals.

"It's my calling to support and relieve the suffering of patients who feel isolated in the hospital," she said.

Her classes have also become a social gathering of sorts for patients who otherwise have little interaction. She said that at the beginning of class, they wander in one by one to their normal meeting place, and the chitchat can be heard from their little end of the hallway.

As Bernard took her seat at the front of the class, the patients immediately got into order, like a teacher commanding her students. Which is fitting, considering Bernard's long background in education of about 27 years.

The importance of patients having the opportunity to connect with one another is plain to see for many.

Paul Donovan, a volunteer with the program, said it can be very isolating for the patients on the floor because everyone has private rooms, and the only time they see one another is when they're outside of the room doing laps, walking around, exercising or going to Bernard's class.

"It's kind of an individual attraction," she said. "Some people really take to it and they do look forward to it."

She remembered a time when two patients discovered they were both German and could both speak the language. After that, the women would speak in their native language together. Bernard said they were able to share a little piece of home in her class.

But social outings aren't the only benefits of Bernard's yoga classes.

"There's a lot of research around this field," Bernard said. "The research shows that breathing practices and yoga in particular stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system and create a relaxation response."

Kathy Powell, a registered nurse and the nurse manager of the Bone Marrow Transplant Unit at Shands, has seen the benefits firsthand.

"Yoga was one of the types of exercises that we used for patients that had transplants," she said. "We used yoga for its flexibility and calming effects. It gives them a



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sense of control over their disease, and they love it."

This calming effect described by Bernard made a difference for one patient. She said this woman is no longer bothered by procedures involving needles. Instead, she now uses her yogic breathing and watches as her blood pressure and heart rate go down.

Another patient, who suffers from fibromyalgia, a painful muscle and joint disease, also used yoga to relax.

She and her husband chose not to go to the group class, so Bernard did a private session in their room. The patient would stretch out on the couch and her husband would be on the bed. Bernard would do some gentle stretching and guided relaxation. At the end, she said, they would both be snoring because they'd be in such deep sleep.

"It's always heartwarming to me because it's a sign they really resonated with what we're doing since they were able to relax to that degree," Bernard said.

These benefits of the Arts in Medicine program reach far beyond just the patients. Lindsey Wuest, a senior at the University of Florida, interns with the program.

Wuest spent last summer in Belfast, a city in Northern Ireland, at the International Arts in Health Conference.

Back in Gainesville, she spends her time painting with patients whose illnesses range from terminal cancer to broken wrists. Recently, she has begun working with pediatric dialysis patients. She said she has begun to develop relationships with long-term patients.

"For some reason, they open up when I'm standing there and drawing with them or

painting with them," she said.

Bernard still remembers one of the first patients she developed a long-term relationship with.

She was one of the first patients that Bernard worked with when she joined the Arts in Medicine Program.

The patient had been on the oncology ward for some time. She had been battling cancer for more than 10 years by the time Bernard met her. The patient always had a smile and kind word ready for anyone, Bernard said.

"She was so open and receptive to engage in practices to support herself with feeling better and improving her outlook on life," she said.

She was religious in her classes, attending twice a week from the first time they were offered. She would even schedule her outpatient chemotherapy around the class schedule. Bernard would go to her treatments, at the patient's request, and sit with her, doing gentle stretching and

movement while she was actually getting chemotherapy.

Bernard worked with this patient through her death.

She still feels her impact both personally and on the Arts in Medicine program in general.

"She was so encouraging to me," she said. "She inspired me to want to go further with my training and with the development of these programs."

While patients continue to inspire, their families also provide a positive effect. Diana Fillipps, 29, was diagnosed with lymphoblastic leukemia, a cancer found in the white blood cells, on Christmas Day. Her husband, David Fillipps, 27, has been with her every step of the way. So has the couple's 6-month-old son, Bryce. They attend Diana's yoga classes with her.

Diana said Bernard's classes help her to feel relaxed, and her husband agrees.

"It helped her face the day," he said.

Families always help patients to stay positive. Recently, a jazz musician's wife was in the

hospital, and her husband was hoping music might soothe her. Kathy DeWitt played a simple jazz arrangement for the couple.

The patient turned to her husband. "Oh, baby," she said.

Those were her first words spoken in weeks.

During Bernard's class, as the patients stretched and breathed, the Fillipps family followed along.

Bernard guided her patients through the movements. She told them to reach around and hug themselves.

With Bryce sitting at attention in his lap, David wrapped his arms around his son.

Calmly, while looking out into her class, Bernard recited a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The room was silent, except for the whir of the air conditioning unit, the breathing of the patients and the rumble of her words.

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us," she said. ●

