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The Art of Healing

PARTNERSHIPS BOOST INNOVATIVE THERAPY PROGRAM **BY KATHIE FARNELL**

“Hi, I’m Rita Stuck, and this is the Art Cart.” Hospital patient Chris Hughes looks up to see a brightly-colored cart loaded with art supplies trundling into his room. Stuck, a volunteer at Sacred Heart Hospital on the Emerald Coast, clears off Hughes’ bed tray. She points to the cart’s supply of canvas and acrylic paints. “Want to try painting?”

Hughes looks doubtful. “I don’t know how to paint.”

Stuck smiles. “That’s okay. I’ll help you.”

A hospital stay is not ordinarily thought of as a cultural experience. However, a new program at Sacred Heart Hospital is bringing music and art to patients, visitors and the entire community. Funding for the Miramar Beach hospital’s Arts in Medicine program will be used to compensate artists who perform at the hospital, helping incorporate the arts into the health facility’s daily routine. The Art Cart, staffed by volunteers, is another way to make art part of the hospital stay. Patients and visitors alike can help themselves to the cart’s paints, clay, crayons and simple musical instruments.

The cart even includes props — objects which can be arranged into a still life — and art books to inspire the patient. Rita Stuck gets Chris Hughes started on his own art project by putting a few strokes on canvas. Encouraged, Hughes joins in. “Oh,” he says, looking surprised. “I can do this.”

Stuck, a photographer herself, is used to patients who are reluctant to believe they can make art. “I try to put them at ease by talking with them while they work. I get them comfortable with the thought that they can do something. Or I can leave a

packet of supplies with them and check on them later.”

Sarah Bailey, Sacred Heart’s marketing coordinator, says that Arts in Medicine is a valuable new tool to enhance patient health. “As people come to our hospital, we want them to have a positive experience, so any activity we can provide to aid recovery is important.” She notes that the program is grounded in science. “Studies show that certain types of music can actually lower blood pressure and heart rate, regulate breathing, lower cholesterol and reduce stress and anxiety.”

Under the program, Sinfonia Gulf Coast will send musicians to perform in the hospital while the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County will assist by opening its portfolio of painters, sculptors and other artists who are interested in lending their talents to the program.

The Arts in Medicine program is part of the University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine’s initiative to use arts to improve health care in rural communities throughout Florida. Sacred Heart Hospital on the Emerald Coast was one of only five facilities in the state to receive funding for the program through the State of Florida Department of Cultural Affairs, the National Endowment of the Arts and the University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine.

Although the program is a relatively recent addition to Sacred Heart, Sharon Abele, the hospital’s volunteer services manager, notes that art therapy has a proven track record. Back in the 1980s the University of Florida began studying the benefits to patients of adding arts to the hospital experience. The university started an arts therapy program in the 1990s with Shands Hospital. Since then,

they have worked not only to expand their own program but to offer these programs to other hospitals, helping them get funding to establish arts programs.

Arts Organizations Participate

The Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County plays a major role in helping Sacred Heart reach out to area artists says Jennifer Steele, the Alliance’s executive director. “We have a large database of artists who are either members of the Alliance or who benefit from it. We sent out a ‘Call to Artists’ to attend a meeting with hospital staff at our Bayou Arts Center, and we were very pleased with the response.” The Alliance works with all sorts of artists, Steele says. “Everything from basket makers to storytellers, but we’re finding our biggest response for the Arts in Medicine program is coming from the visual artists — painters and sculptors.”

Abele says that the hospital’s collaboration with the Cultural Arts Alliance of Walton County is key to bringing more artists into the program. “We went and met with a roomful of artists, and we’re also getting the word out through email. We’re talking with a lot of different artists, including puppeteers and storytellers, because we know people respond to art in different ways.”

Arts in Medicine has also provided funds for the hospital to partner with Sinfonia Gulf Coast, which sends musicians to perform in areas throughout the facility. Music director and conductor Demetrius Fuller says the partnership is a natural fit for Sinfonia. “I’ve always thought that bringing the arts to the community through whatever outlet is important.” How did the collaboration start? “It landed in our lap,” he says,



when Sherry Londe, who is a Sinfonia board member as well as a member of the hospital's Arts in Medicine Committee, brought the idea to his attention.

The partnership premiered in June 2012 with the dedication of the hospital's Cancer Center. Since then, Sinfonia has expanded its musical programs beyond the Cancer Center, and now musicians perform at various locations throughout the hospital, including waiting areas.

Performances take place once or twice a month, but Fuller says he would like to offer music at least three times monthly. "We've gotten emails from hospital patrons who were thrilled that they could listen to music while receiving chemotherapy. We want to continue bringing in Sinfonia musicians, and we want to help make the program sustainable."

Entire Community Benefits

Bailey says that Arts in Medicine is not just designed for patients. "Beyond inpatients and their families, we want to benefit outpatients, visitors and our staff. We also plan to

combine arts activities with existing outpatient services, like the cancer support groups which meet in the hospital."

Steele is excited about the program's potential to help artists as well as the community at large. "The program can benefit artists along with hospital patients, staff and visitors. It also helps us get the word out about how the Alliance works to put the community in a better place to support the arts."

Abele says the program will help improve the quality of life in the community.

"About half the hospitals in the United States offer some form of arts therapy. It's moodchanging. Transforming a hospital stay to include some form of exposure to art has been shown to quicken recovery times. We recognize that it's not enough to heal the body. Art helps us heal the soul."

Chris Hughes looks up from the canvas he has completed. "That looks sort of like a fish," says Stuck, pointing to one colorful image. Hughes studies it closely. "You know, it does," he says. He smiles. "You have made my day. I didn't know I could paint like this." **ec**

Rita Stuck brings the Art Cart stockpiled with paints, paper and plenty of healing hope to Chris Hughes's bedside at Sacred Heart Hospital on the Emerald Coast.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Members of the community who want to offer support to Arts in Medicine through donations or input will soon be able to visit a website which is in development. Meanwhile, artists interested in participating in the program and anyone wanting to offer support may contact Sharon Abele directly at sabele@shhpens.org or (850) 278-3081.