

## SPOTLIGHT

SECTION  
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## creative healing

A new program brings artists and performers  
to hospitals to help ease the sometimes numbing  
anxiety felt by patients and their families



BY COLIN DABKOWSKI / NEWS ARTS WRITER

**T**he fluorescent-lit waiting rooms of the Roswell Park Cancer Institute can be tense, somber and often mirthless places. For cancer patients and their families, passing time in a Roswell Park waiting room usually means leafing absent-mindedly through last December's issue of *Golf Digest* or staring at closed-captioned MSNBC broadcasts. These are paltry distractions from the prime task of many people who find themselves in the curved, red brick walls of Roswell Park: twisting themselves into a ball of worry about the injustice of the disease, about morbid contingency plans, about a hundred different kinds of potential bad news.

But on a recent afternoon, the sullen occupants of one Roswell Park waiting room got an unexpected break from the status quo. As patients and their companions waited silently in the second-floor Breast Center for their names to be called, a group of six artists walked into the room. The group was training for Western New York's first Arts in Healthcare program, an initiative conceived and organized by the University at Buffalo's Center for the Arts to bring artists into two area hospitals.

Led by the Florida-based dancer and longtime health care worker Rusty



Leah Daniels Houghtaling, an art educator, photographer and artist-in-residence at Women & Children's Hospital, paints with Chiselle Figuero, 4, of Buffalo in the hospital's dialysis unit.

Bill Wippert/Buffalo News

Brandman, the group of artists introduced themselves and started chatting with the patients and their companions.

"We started talking about the idea of a long wait, how long you wait in a waiting room," said Ann Frank, a member of the group and a painter from East Aurora. "Rusty got up with one of the other students and started just goofing around, kind of miming how you feel when you wait for a long time. It made people laugh and smile, even the husbands who were waiting." Eventually, the group's impromptu miming session turned into a collaborative songwriting workshop in which the artists and some of the waiting room occupants wrote and performed a piece called "The Long Wait Blues."

Even if they weren't participating, people put down their newspapers and started talking to one another. A long silence had been broken, and, if only for that moment, thoughts of breast cancer and the worries that come with it were 1,000 miles away.

It sure beat *Golf Digest*.

The Arts in Healthcare program will see 12 area artists working with patients, staff and families at both Women & Children's Hospital and Roswell Park. The wide-ranging effort, the brainchild of UB Center for the Arts Director Tom

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***"I look at the little ones, stripped of all control, totally powerless ... It's just me and this person in this white coat. If you can make a difference to them, if you can reduce that anxiety, if you can create a distraction and then involve someone in any kind of creative activity, then the arts have succeeded in improving health care."*** Tom Burrows, Director, UB Center for the Arts

# Staffers say program has positive effect



Bill Wippert/Buffalo News

**Visual artist Susan Reedy helps dialysis unit patient Jessica Frysz, 20, of Cheektowaga, make flip-flop collages in Women & Children's Hospital. Six artists from the Arts in Healthcare program work in Women & Children's Hospital, while six others work with patients, staff and families at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute.**

## ART • From F1

Burrows, began more than two years ago, after Burrows attended a workshop on the arts in health care led by the Florida-based artist and longtime health care worker Jill Sonke-Henderson.

The program, which will celebrate its launch on Friday with an event at the Center for the Arts in Amherst, is modeled on the successful and long-running Arts in Medicine program at Shands Hospital at the University of Florida in Gainesville, Fla., where Sonke-Henderson has been an artist-in-residence for the past 14 years.

"It was something I knew we could do really fairly simply," said Burrows, who procured a \$287,182 grant from the John R. Oishei Foundation last October to launch the program at Women & Children's Hospital. After recruiting dozens of interested artists from the community and formulating a plan with the help of Sonke-Henderson and others from the national Society for the Arts in Healthcare, Burrows' project piqued the interest of doctors and staff at Roswell Park, which agreed earlier this year to provide funding for six artists who would work exclusively at the cancer institute.

Both Women & Children's Hospital and Roswell Park had already developed significant arts programs, but each of their directors saw the benefits – both ancillary and direct – of a program with salaried artists dedicated to improving the experi-

ence of staying, visiting or working in a hospital. Donald Trump, Roswell's president and CEO, called the project "a no-brainer."

The 12 artists-in-residence are the core of the program, but Burrows said the CFA will also ask many visiting performers from the center's yearly season to visit area hospitals and perform for and with patients, hospital staff and families.

Sonke-Henderson, who has been an artist-in-residence at the pioneering Florida hospital for more than 14 years and worked to establish hospital arts programs around the world, called the Center for the Arts program the most ambitious of its sort.

"This is the best I've ever seen, truly," Sonke-Henderson said, noting that most such programs normally start with one or two dedicated artists and grow gradually from there. "To launch a program with 12 artists-in-residence has never been done before in the United States."

## Lowering anxiety

There are reams of research about the potential benefits of the arts for hospital patients, but none of it claims that art can cure disease. What it can do, according to its proponents, is to reduce the boredom, anxiety and fear that comes prepackaged with the hospital experience. Burrows pointed to research that music and art-making in hospitals led to lower anxiety levels and more accurate treatment in pediatric patients. He sees the arts in health care as an elegant and direly needed antidote to the psychological stresses of the

sterile hospital environment.

"I look at the little ones, and I think, God – stripped of all control, totally powerless, and now my mother and father, they're going out the door. It's just me and this person in this white coat," Burrows said. "If you can make a difference to them, if you can reduce that anxiety, if you can create a distraction and then involve someone in any kind of creative activity," he said, then the arts have succeeded in improving health care.

For Stuart Fuchs, an artist-in-residence at Roswell Park and lead guitarist for the popular local gypsy-jazz band Babik, the potential effects an artist can have on hospital patients are immense.

"One is the ability to express themselves, to give the journey of their illness a voice, to give it some kind of story, to be able to step back and see what's happening from a different perspective," Fuchs said.

The other, Fuchs said, is to give patients back a sense of power that their illness has taken away. "By helping patients to incorporate what they're going through in creative play, whether it's visual art, music, dance or theater, it gives them a chance to take charge, even if it's just for five minutes," Fuchs said.

Case in point: Fuchs, on one of his first days in the hospital in September, found himself riding an elevator with a doctor, a patient in a wheelchair and the patient's family. On the way from one floor to the next, Fuchs strummed a few tentative chords on his ukulele.

"The next thing you know, we're

singing a song together for some brief, quote-unquote 'elevator music.' It was really fun, and just that 30 seconds really lifted people's spirits."

Staffers say that the program, even in its infancy, is already having a positive effect on the hospital atmosphere. Margarita Coyne, Roswell Park's director of Patient Care Services, praised the program's artists for their ability to accomplish a mental shift in patients that mere conversations cannot accomplish.

"Fifty percent of hospitals have some sort of art program for patients, but it's to varying degrees," Coyne said. "We need to push those boundaries and promote art as a form of expression, to communicate on a different level."

Less than a mile away at Women & Children's Hospital, all the injustices of illness in the dialysis and intensive care units are juxtaposed against the promise of new life in the maternity ward. There, another crew of six artists are dedicated to serving a notably younger demographic.

The hospital, which was the primary partner in the CFA initiative, has had a Child Life department for more than 20 years. While art activities have been included in the department's mission – to reduce stress and anxiety and explain medical procedures to juvenile patients – there has never been such an organized and extensive program involving community artists. It's an addition that Deborah King, a child life specialist at the hospital since 1997, welcomes.

"I think anyone can picture being in the hospital, having some

heavy-duty, serious situations and then having an hour where you're taken away from there to forget about yourself and forget about the situation you're in," King said. "Sometimes art can facilitate some emotions or [become] the symbol of something bigger."

## A whole new audience

Fuchs, like the other 11 artists in the program, spends an average of 15 to 20 hours per week in the hospital. The rest of the time, he's out doing gigs with Babik and developing his skills as a musician. That dual responsibility, Burrows noted, is built into the program on purpose.

"We want you because you're an artist," Burrows said of the Center's approach to finding the ideal artists-in-residence. "We want those sensibilities. We want the desires, the feelings, the emotions, the potential for empathy that goes with that. But you've got to be flexible. They're not there to produce art. You're there to engage a patient or their parent."

The artists in the program include writers, visual artists, musicians and actors. Of the more than 70 artists who applied, Burrows said, the final 12 were chosen as much for their artistic accomplishments as their ability to be flexible. In a hospital setting, artists often find themselves working outside their areas of expertise.

Christina Pippa, a playwright assigned to Women & Children's Hospital, found herself working on a drawing with 11-year-old Brandon Metzinger in the hospital's dialysis unit. And Pragna Hathi Wood, a visual artist assigned to Roswell Park, is as happy painting with a patient as trying her hand at music.

"You're bringing in everything from your life into the relationship, and it's not really about painting," Wood said. "I think to me that was the surprise, to discover that I can use the fact that I'm such a bad singer, and sing a really bad song. We did that yesterday. [A patient] said, 'I can't sing.' And I said, 'I can't sing either, let's just really sing badly.' And we sang together badly and it was so much fun."

For Burrows and his tight-knit teams of artists, the current version of the CFA's Arts in Healthcare program is only the beginning of what could be a much bigger endeavor. Burrows said that the Arts in Healthcare model is applicable to any hospital, and could also be adapted for use in area nursing homes and with Hospice, the palliative care agency.

But mostly, he said, it's a chance to bring the arts to a whole new audience, one which may need it more than any other.

"You see such a cross-section of humanity, and that is a hospital," Burrows said, his voice cracking. "Some of these people could buy the Center for the Arts. There are others who never have a hope of coming in here on a ticket. So it crosses ethnic, cultural, economic lines, and it's something to be made available for anyone in need in that hospital environment. That's what appeals to me so much about this program, and I think to most artists. I think we all care about that."

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