

## Art Illuminates Patients' Experience at the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center

BETH HOMICKI, EILEEN K. JOYCE

Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center, Boston, Massachusetts, USA

*“Art that distracts and engages a patient’s mind with cheerful and calming colors, forms, and images can...reduce the high levels of anxiety that are often present in hospital waiting rooms. When patients are relaxed and receptive, they place themselves in the best possible state of mind and spirit for medicine to do its work.”*

—Brian, *Illuminations* artist and cancer survivor



—Brian Fitzgibbon  
“Sisters,” bronze sculpture

Correspondence: Beth Homicki, Program Manager, *Illuminations*, Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center, 55 Fruit Street, Cox Building 640, Boston, Massachusetts 02114, USA. Telephone: 617-726-6298; e-mail: [ehomicki@partners.org](mailto:ehomicki@partners.org). ©AlphaMed Press 1083-7159/2004/\$12.00/0

For centuries, people have known of the healing power of the arts. In the late 1800s, Florence Nightingale wrote, “Little as we know about the way in which we are affected by form, by color and light, we do know this, they have an actual physical effect. Variety of form and brilliancy of color in the objects presented to patients are actual means of recovery” [1]. Today the arts are once again being considered an integral component in the care of patients in health care facilities across the nation. Health care providers understand that caring for a patient goes well beyond the physical, and encompasses mental and spiritual health as well. Scientists and organizations such as the *Society for the Arts in Healthcare* are currently working to provide concrete evidence in support of these long held assertions by investigating the link between the visual arts, color, texture, and environment on measurable aspects of health, healing, and well-being. Studies have shown that patients exposed to nature scenes through either a window view or artistic representation had less anxiety, requested less pain medication, and had a quicker post-operative recovery time than those without such views [2, 3]. Many hospitals are now using art to enhance the environment of their facilities. Some provide opportunities for patients to showcase their artistic interpretation of illness and healing;

others are engaging specialists to choreograph colors, art, and design in soothing ways. In the past few years, the Massachusetts General Hospital Cancer Center has begun to explore using the arts as such a complementary component to the care we provide. The MGH Cancer Center has endeavored to create a healing environment for patients, family members, and staff through a three-fold approach encompassing sight, sound, and expression.

The central component of this endeavor is *Illuminations*, a rotating art exhibit developed in order to create a visually healing environment within the center. The exhibit began in January 2001 as an effort to improve patients’ overall experience and to “offer enlightenment and encouragement.” Since then patients and staff alike have embraced the program, supporting our belief that the environment in which care is delivered can be used as a tool to aid healing. The project has transformed generic waiting areas into a virtual art gallery of revolving works by numerous local artists. Artists and their work are selected based on their ability to embrace *Illuminations’* mission to “shed light on the human experience and inspire viewers to expand their vision of life.” Exhibits have featured a variety of media including oil, acrylic, watercolor, black and white photography, pen and ink drawings, collage, wood carvings, and bronze sculptures.



*“The positive response to **Illuminations** has provided ..an entirely new and meaningful venue for my paintings. I feel challenged to create work that provides comfort and encouragement. **Illuminations** offers patients and their*

*families a brief respite from their difficult journeys, and it has presented me with a meaningful and challenging artistic direction. For this I am grateful.”*

—Michele Dangelo, *Illuminations* Artist



—Michele Dangelo, "Tide's Lane," oil on canvas

*Illuminations* came into being as the result of one patient's experience at the Cancer Center, his vision as an artist, and his wife's steadfast pursuit of this dream, as well as the openness of the Clinical Director of the Center. *Christine Cleary* explains that during her husband's treatment, the Cancer Center became a second home to them. "When you are sitting in a waiting room as a cancer patient or family member, often you are too nervous or distracted to read. We would sit in the chairs, waiting for our name to be called, and my husband would often say how nice it would be to see some original artwork on the walls." After her husband's death, Cleary contacted Bruce Chabner, M.D., Clinical Director of the MGH Cancer Center, to discuss an idea for the development of what is now *Illuminations*. They both agreed there was an opportunity to improve the physical environment of the center, but at the time, neither realized the success *Illuminations* would become.

Following that initial discussion, a group of Cancer Center staff, representing the many disciplines within the center, worked together with cancer survivors and family members to explore the use of art in the environment and to develop the mission and reality that is *Illuminations*. The group chose to start out small, within one clinical area. Doing so enabled *Illuminations* to build a reputation as a

well-run program, and generated positive energy within both the Cancer Center and the artistic community, thus making the current expansion possible. A mission statement and goals were developed as well as practical tools such as guidelines for submissions, and acceptance and rejection letters. The committee was unanimous in its recognition that while many pieces of artwork may be of critical artistic value, not all are appropriate for our audience in the Cancer Center. The group also made the decision that although some survivors derive emotional and psychological benefit from chronicling their struggle through photography, paintings, or other graphic representation, *Illuminations* was not the venue for this work. *Illuminations* has always been defined as a rotating art exhibit with the mission of improving the hospital atmosphere by selecting artwork that symbolizes life and hope.

Since the first exhibit, *Illuminations* has expanded, and the committee has been learning along the way. Installing an inexpensive wall hanging system has made the changing of artwork much less difficult. A logo developed early in the process has helped to foster a project identity for patients and staff. Now that the *Illuminations* exhibits have traveled to many distinct areas of the hospital, its presence has helped present a unified identity for the Cancer Center at large.



From its inception, *Illuminations* has been enthusiastically embraced by patients and professionals throughout the hospital who have recognized its quiet impact. In just over 1 year, the exhibit has expanded from one clinical area to eight unique settings, providing a soothing, entertaining, stimulating environment that routinely changes, and engages viewers in different ways. In addition to creating a visually soothing environment, the Cancer Center has now begun to explore other uses of the arts in healing. Healing Sounds of Music, a pilot program conducted last fall, involved a harpist playing in several patient areas. The overwhelming success of the pilot program has led to the launching of a 3-year partnership between the Boston Conservatory and the Cancer Center HOPES (Helping Our Patients and Families through Education and Support) program now known as Gentle Muses.

Along with improving the Center's physical environment through artwork and soothing sounds, the Cancer Center has also embraced patients' own artistic expression with the help of an art therapist's weekly workshops entitled The Healing Power of Creative Expression. The workshop involves a unique combination of meditation, interaction, and artistic expression. The success of this self-expression workshop has allowed further expansion of the program to include new monthly workshops entitled Poetry to Heal By in which patients create with words and share their strength and hope in a unique and personal way.

The MGH Cancer Center's efforts to incorporate the arts with the care provided here has empowered patients while creating a warm, welcoming, dynamic space where patients can heal their bodies and tend to their spirit at the same time.

If you are interested in starting an exhibit within your own institution, here are some helpful steps:

- Organize a group involving staff members from all disciplines, patients, and family members who have an interest in the project and a willingness to work through the many details of building a successful program.
- Develop a mission statement. Give your project a clear purpose and guiding principles so that as it grows in popularity and interest it does not divert from its primary goal.
- Develop tools such as guidelines for submissions, a program brochure that will appeal to artists considering submission, acceptance and rejection letters.
- Reach out to the local art communities, art schools, etc. Attend art shows and open studios. Have your program's brochure and submission guidelines in hand to distribute to interested artists.

For more information on *Illuminations*, visit our website at <http://www.massgeneral.org/cancer/illuminations>

- 1 Nightingale F. Notes on Nursing: What It Is and What It Is Not. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1888:109.
- 2 Ulrich R. View through a window may influence recovery from surgery. *Science* 1984;224:420-421.
- 3 Ulrich RS, Lunden O, Eltinge JL. Effects of exposure to nature and abstract pictures on patients recovering from heart surgery. Paper presented at the Thirty-Third Meetings of the Society for Psychophysiological Research, Rottach-Egern, Germany. Abstract published in *Psychophysiology*, 1993;30(suppl 1):7.