

Creating a healing environment

By Amber Smith
 Staff writer

A man wanders into the hallway when he hears a musician playing jazz, happy to reminisce about the time he played saxophone with Louis Armstrong.

Another man begins crying, gazing at a painting of a beach scene and wrestling with private memories.

A Syracuse University choir sings, "Loyal be thy sons and daughters to thy memory," and a woman tears with pride for her alma mater.

As a woman draws geometric designs within a circular mandala, she pauses to thank her instructor. "I'm getting ready to die, and you taught me how to live," she says.

These are scenes from Crouse Hospital in Syracuse and scenes like these are becoming more common across the country, as hospitals strive for holistic environments, says Gay Hanna, director of the Society for the Arts in Healthcare, which is based in Washington, D.C.

A hospital is a place where people die and tears fall, and also where people heal and powerful memories can be made. Administrators at Crouse are committed to making the hospital a healing environment through art. They are turning to volunteers to make music, to paint and someday maybe to bring in clowns.

Injecting art into medical care harkens back centuries, Hanna says. "The arts have always, since ancient times, been considered great forces of healing." The past 100 years we have spent enamored of technology and scientific procedures, she says, but in recent years, health-care providers have come to a new understanding. "We're finding out we don't have to be without art. In fact, the



Peter Chen / Staff photographer
GRACIA SEARS (left), a volunteer lay chaplain at Crouse Hospital, shows Gloria Freebern, of Syracuse, a patient at the hospital, a book on drawing while Sears paints at the hospital. Patients can ask Sears to paint pictures for them.

Crouse Hospital emphasizes art with medical care

art enhances technology."

Many Central New York hospitals and nursing homes offer various art or music programs. Crouse is an example of a hospital where efforts are integrated, with the encouragement of upper management.

"As technology advances, there is a very important other side, and that's the high-touch," says Derrick Suehs, the chief quality officer. He challenges staff to make the hospital experience less intrusive, less mystical for patients. His mantra: "People, you make memories."

In that spirit, Crouse regularly invites a choral group from Syracuse University's Setnor School of Music to sing in the hallways. The hospital also opened gallery space for a rotating collection of artwork from city schoolchildren. And it arranges for a chaplain associate to set up an easel and paint, so patients can watch.

Gracia Sears is a spiritual-care volunteer at the hospital, and an artist. "I think art and religion are one," she says.

Sears started painting on 4-South, Crouse's oncology unit, about four years ago. Patients can choose a painting — from a collection of about 20, and growing — to hang in their room, if they like.

She talks with interested patients as she paints.

Sylvia Polite, hospitalized for sickle cell disease, gets out of bed to visit with Sears. "When

I'm up to it, I get up and sketch something," says the 23-year-old, who enjoys sewing and designing clothes.

Gloria Freebern, a nursing assistant at the hospital who is now a patient, also stops by. She likes gardening, and she dries flowers.

"So I'm a bit of an artist," she says.

As Sears talks, she finishes a painting with trees, rocks and water. She sketched the scene while visiting her son in Washington state. She notes that many patients choose paintings with water. "I think there's something very calming about water."

Sears also makes art booklets for patients. "There are many roads to one's interior life," the booklet says. "Some find it by cooking. Some by gardening, reading or sewing." The booklet explains how drawing is meditative and how circular images called mandalas can help reveal inner feelings.

She's also a fan of labyrinths, mazes that you travel with pencil on paper. Sears says what looks like an exercise in frustration is, instead, calming.

"You'll feel your heartbeat slow right down," she says.

Adding art to medical care has been fueled by groups like the Society for the Arts in Healthcare, books like "Illness and the Art of Creative Self-Expression" by Dr. John Graham-Pole, and research in the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine.

Hanna, the society's director, says a variety of nursing research projects have shown how art reduces stress levels in patients. Other projects have looked at nursing-home residents who require less pain medicine and fewer antidepressants when they are involved in art, "because it breaks down isolation and gives hope," she says.

Another recent study showed heart-surgery patients who prayed and were involved with artwork healed more quickly than those who did not.

The research even stretches into the basic sciences. At the University of Arizona, scientists proved that music has an effect on biological growth. They germinated 4,600 okra and zucchini seeds and divided them into different growth chambers. Those chambers that received musical sound "had a highly statistically significant effect on the number of seeds sprouted," the researchers reported in the Society for the Arts in Healthcare journal last February. "The effect was independent of temperature, seed type, position in room, specific petri dish and person doing the scoring."

Beyond the positive effects on patients who are trying to heal, Hanna says art — whether visual, musical or dramatic — can improve the hospital environment. It rejuvenates doctors and nurses and their stress-filled days, she says. "It makes it a friendlier place. It humanizes the environment."



Michelle Gabel / Staff photographer

ROBERT JACOBS (far left), of Mexico, a patient at Crouse Hospital, is serenaded by Syracuse University students in a "healing arts" program. Dr. Dorothy Wright (second from left) is the hospital's medical director of palliative care. The singers are (from left) Katie McCarter, Wright, Kaitlin Hart, Rachel Greenfield, Maggie Luther and Sky Harris.



Al Campanie / Staff photographer

KEYARRAH CANNON, 9, (left) and **KALEIGH MONTELONGO**, 8, both of Syracuse, unveil an exhibit of art drawn by students from Roberts Elementary School that is hanging at Crouse Hospital. Administrators are committed to making the Syracuse Hospital a healing environment through art.