

M.D. Anderson providing innovative art programs for patients living with cancer

Among prognostic tests, blood workups and chemo regimens, doctors at The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center can now request a session with a professional artist on their patients' charts.

Inspired by her belief of the transformative power of art, Jennifer Wheler, M.D., assistant professor in the Department of Investigational Cancer Therapeutics at M. D. Anderson, founded the 501c3 non-profit organization COLLAGE: The Art for Cancer Network in 2006 to bring innovative art programs to people living with cancer.

COLLAGE brings local artists to M. D. Anderson to work with cancer patients in a variety of mediums, including collage, digital photography, shibori (fabric painting), Chinese ink art and watercolors through in-hospital

Wheler, who has a degree in art history and worked in a Manhattan art gallery before deciding to attend medical school, brings her own perspective to the program.

Dr. Wheler says, "As an oncologist, I witness firsthand the hardship and suffering experienced by cancer patients. Drawing on my background in art, I was inspired to merge the disciplines of art and medicine to create dynamic programs to support patients and their caregivers.

"I founded COLLAGE to provide innovative arts programming to people living with cancer. With the early support of M.D. Anderson President Dr. John Mendelsohn, and further support from The Menil Collection, Dr. Eduardo Bruera, Dr. Razelle Kurzrock, Susan French and Laura Fletcher (among many others at M.D. Anderson and the Houston community), COL-



Jennifer Wheler, M.D.

lirmed my belief in the power of art to transform lives.

"Often participants will say 'I am not creative', or 'I haven't done art since I was in fifth grade.' These same participants often create the most wonderful work, and then return for further workshops — having artists work with them to tap into their creativity is a remarkable thing to witness.

"COLLAGE has been a tremendous source of satisfaction for me, and I feel privileged to be doing this work. The benefits for participants are as varied as the artwork they create," she concluded.

Laura Fletcher of Sarasota, FL moved to Houston in 1996 to attend Rice University for graduate school. Recently, someone very close to her passed away from brain cancer. While volunteering at the Menil Collection, she learned about COLLAGE and decided to take a class.

"I enjoyed being part of the class and seeing how the instructors in-

spired the patients. It also gave me a chance to express some of what I was feeling. The classes made it possible to get the hard-to-verbalize feelings all out."

Karen Boyce Eckhardt, a three-year cancer survivor, attended her first COLLAGE class December. "I had never held a paint brush in my hand before going to a COLLAGE class, never painted as a child," says Fletcher. "I remember feeling freedom when I did this painting because it was done standing rather than sitting. I felt very fluid and free."

She continued, "I write fiction and poetry for a living and am always striving to paint with words, I figured why not try to do the same with a paint brush."

Wheler, who works with breast cancer patients enrolled in Phase I clinical trials testing new targeted therapies at M. D. Anderson, plans to develop research measuring the impact of COLLAGE on patients' quality of life.



Artwork by Laura Fletcher

workshops and an artist-in-residence program. To date, COLLAGE has reached over 1,000 patients, family members and cancer care providers.

Programs are designed with the needs of different patients in mind. In the Palliative Care Unit at M. D. Anderson, artists capture and transcribe patients' visions into painted, drawn or video taped works of art because many have advanced disease and are not able to make their own.

COLLAGE has, in a short period of time, established pilot programs that have been enthusiastically received by participants and family members. Our programs include art workshops led by talented Houston artists and an Artist-in-Residence Program where artists work one-on-one with patients in waiting rooms, in hospital rooms and in treatment areas. To date we have had over 1,000 participants in our programs. The feedback has con-



Artwork by Karen Boyce Eckhardt