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Texas Hospital Uses Art to Relieve Patient Stress From Cancer and Treatment

By GREG FLAKUS

The diagnosis of cancer can be as devastating as the disease itself for many people and many patients struggle to maintain their spirits as they face the often debilitating treatment, even the prospect of death. One of the nation's top hospitals for the treatment of cancer - the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center at the University of Texas in Houston - has found a way to help patients maintain their spirits, through art classes with professional artists. Focusing cancer patients on their creative side helps many of them forget about their disease, even if only for a few hours each week.

Mary Jane Willard has a new lease on life and a new way of expressing herself. The 53-year-old survivor of breast cancer is learning Chinese ink art through the M.D. Anderson Cancer Center's COLLAGE program, also known as the Art for Cancer Network.

“It relaxes you; it relaxes me,” said Mary Jane Willard. “I have learned a lot of different things with the art, Chinese ink art. And I have made a lot of friends.”



Mary Jane Willard

The class is taught by professional artist Peihong Dong Endris, who learned her technique while growing up in China. She says the class helps patients forget about their daily struggle with disease and find comfort in their creativity.

“I think from this class, even if for some people it is difficult at times, they can get some short-time peace,” said Peihong Dong Endris.

Students like Mary Jane Willard find themselves captivated by this art form and their teacher.

“She is very good,” she said, “She helps you go step-by-step. And with each person, she demonstrates, too; she gives you that opportunity.”



Peihong Dong Endris teaching

Although there are other art therapy programs for cancer patients, what makes this one special is its focus on the art, rather than on therapy. Having professional artists teach these classes was the idea of Dr. Jennifer Wheler, who established COLLAGE three years ago.

“Whereas art therapy has a specifically therapeutic intent, the COLLAGE is really all about having fun,” said Jennifer Wheler.



Dr. Jennifer Wheler

Studies show that improvements in mood and spirit can help a patient's immune system fight disease and, although no studies have been carried out yet on programs like COLLAGE, Dr. Wheler says she thinks it helps.

“It can't hurt; it can only help,” she said. “And scientists are trying to be a little more rigorous about quantifying the effect.”

Patient George Spaulding, a 74-year-old native of New Orleans, who is battling lung and bone cancer, says attending these art classes keeps him from feeling confined.

“It gets me out from the room we are staying in and gets my mind more active,” said George Spaulding. “I enjoy art and so this is a different kind of art I am trying to learn.”



Students painting with Chinese ink

Spaulding hopes to emulate Peihong Endris in assembling a large portfolio of paintings that he can take back to share with friends in New Orleans. As he leafs through a thick pile of his paintings, it is clear he is well on his way to achieving his goal.

Since the COLLAGE program started here in October 2006, more than 1,000 people have participated and several professional artists from the Houston area are now on staff as instructors, helping patients discover their creativity, even as they struggle to cope with cancer and the treatments aimed at stopping it.