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by

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Artfully Healing Austin:

Artist's Hospital Beautification Project Spotlights Local Healing Arts

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Report

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Dedication

To my family, thank you for love and support throughout graduate school.

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Abstract

Artfully Healing Austin:

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Supervisor: Renita Coleman

Art has long been used as a healing method. Thousands of years ago, the Greeks designed temples to surround patients with art and nature and to promote healing and harmony. Today, a growing amount of evidence-based design research proves that hospitals need to be more mindful of the healing environment through better design and inclusion of the arts to reduce stress, lower costs and shorten hospital stays.

This report follows Aaron Darling, an artist and part-time nurse based in Austin, Texas, who has seen a need for such change in local hospitals. Through expansive nature-themed wall murals, Darling hopes to improve the blank walls he has seen in hospital hallways and patient rooms and increase the presence of local art in Austin-area hospitals, starting with Seton Medical Center.

His story sheds light on other local professionals using art to heal, such as art therapists, and successful healing arts programs, including Dell Children's Medical Center of Central Texas. More than that, this report highlights the power of art itself to serve patients by improving healing spaces and acting as a positive distraction in an oftentimes scary place: the hospital.

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Artfully Healing Austin:

Austin's Castle Hill Graffiti Park glimmered in the early morning sun as Aaron Darling got to work. The local artist chose a spot near the top of the park, walled on three sides but visible from Baylor Street below. Cans of spray paint and other supplies littered the floor at his feet, and a cardboard box and a large blue bag of even more supplies were not far out of reach.

Clad in a paint-splattered, heather gray t-shirt, torn jeans and sneakers that had seen better days, he started outlining the piece, spraying long lines and curves in blue, as the air grew thick with the smell. Words began to form – “Emily, will you go to prom with me?”

A high school prom proposal is not a typical project for this artist, who has painted dozens of expansive murals at Castle Hill, or Hope Outdoor Gallery, as it is also known, and other commissioned works across Austin throughout the last few years. It's also not a typical project for a part-time nurse with a plan to increase the presence of local art in Austin-area hospitals.

But Darling, also a nurse at Seton Medical Center Austin, is creator of the Aaron Darling Beautification Project, through which he aims to paint large-scale monochrome murals of flowers and landscapes on hospital walls for free. After receiving approval last September to begin the project at Seton, he is in the process of creating the first works. The project is part of a growing trend of hospitals incorporating healing arts programs to improve patient health and outcomes. Such efforts also include the art collection at Dell Children's Medical Center in Austin, which houses hundreds of carefully selected artworks.

In his seven years at Seton, Darling says he has long been concerned with the blank walls in patient rooms, as well as hallways. Most rooms are without art. Their only accents are usually a dry erase board, TV and crucifix, and the hallways are not any better.

“The hallways going to X-ray, ICU, surgery, they are just completely blank, beige, long, nothing,” Darling says. “You might as well be in a prison, abandoned building, haunted house. It’s no different than any of those things.”

On the other hand, Dell Children’s and hospitals with similar programs were designed and decorated with patients’ environmental needs in mind.

The difference is troubling, Darling says, because of the numerous studies that show how environment can affect a person’s health, anxiety and overall wellbeing. Art can help with all of those things. With hospitals seen as scary places by many, he hopes his project will bring some comfort and distraction to patients in need as the pieces make their way into Seton later this year.

Inside the Aaron Darling Beautification Project

A New Orleans transplant, Darling now calls South Austin home. He is a husband and a father of two young children – his daughter is even sometimes featured in his sprawling wall murals. He works as a nurse for three days a week and divides the rest of his time between art and family.

Although he has been drawing since childhood, Darling has only been painting for the last decade, on everything from canvas, doors, panels, walls, food trucks, you name it, usually favoring bold, bright colors that make an impact. His subjects often include flowers, giraffes – keep an eye out for these unmistakable creatures around town – and skylines.

He has recently taken on street art and is a member of SprATX, a local artists’ collective. The group of more than a dozen artists works together for exhibitions, commissioned murals and the weekly #atxfreeartfriday project, where artists post clues on Instagram for followers to find free art around the city.

Darling started working at Seton in 2007 as a transporter for the X-ray department, which he describes a “dream job” because it involved interacting with patients all day. “You want me to talk to 300 people a day? No problem,” he says. But as a transporter, he began to notice the hospital’s bare walls.

“The hospital was so naked,” he says. “I would draw them (patients) pictures in a matter of seconds and give it to them to personalize the experience so they’re not just rolling down an empty hallway with a guy in a uniform who doesn’t talk. That’s what most of their experiences are.”

That’s when the idea for the beautification project took hold. When Darling became a nurse a few years later, the vision grew until one night in fall 2013 when he attended a town hall-style meeting for nurses with Kate Henderson, president of the Seton Healthcare Family Central Group of Hospitals. Although he came prepared with research and examples, Darling says he didn’t even get to finish pitching his project to Henderson before she stopped him and expressed interest in his idea – to paint large flowers, lilies, magnolias, etc., on the walls of patient rooms and hallways of the hospital.

Darling’s plan includes small, medium and large monochrome designs, each in a couple of different shades of one color, to break up the monotony of a single beige or light blue wall for the patients who are there the longest, he says. Each of the works will be “something that blends in but looks good.”

Linda Hughes, a former nurse, worked for about 20 years at hospitals around Austin until last year, including at Seton Medical Center Austin with Darling. She first met him in 2011 just before he became a nurse, and says that even then he had the idea for the project and often spoke of wanting to do something good with his art. “All the nurses thought it would be a good idea,” she says.

Hughes says she has always been impressed with Darling’s strong faith in God and his desire to help and heal others.

She, too, describes Seton's walls as blank and boring, sparsely decorated with "the same ugly Monet prints you see in every lobby, any doctor's office." Overall, the environment is "not conducive to healing at all," Hughes says.

"His (Darling's) artwork will make it not such a sterile, depressing environment," Hughes says. "His paintings are really happy. They're fun and they're beautiful to look at."

To get the project rolling, Seton has donated six 6-foot by 8-foot canvases to Darling. He hopes that the first round of canvas work will open the doors for his envisioned wall murals.

"It (a mural) changes the background of the environment," he says. "If we look at studies of how many subliminal things affect a person, a person's health, a person's anxiety, a person's well-being, a person's mindset, how that mindset affects their health, if you look at any of the studies around that sort of stuff, it's all over the place."

Research shows that incorporating the arts into the hospital environment can decrease patients' pain and anxiety, as well as increase patient satisfaction with their hospital stay (See Sidebar: Research). Such findings have led to many hospitals developing healing arts programs.

Exploring Dell Children's

One local hospital that has truly embraced the arts is Dell Children's Medical Center of Texas.

The hospital, which is part of the Seton Healthcare Family, opened in 2007 and houses more than 1,000 paintings, sculptures and other art throughout the hospital, making it Austin's largest public art collection outside of a museum, according to the Seton website. This includes both nationally and globally renowned artists as well as local

talents. Acquiring the collection has cost more than \$900,000, according to a January 2008 article in the Austin Chronicle.

Entering the hospital is an experience in itself. Walking in, visitors look up at a lofty tower accented with different colored glass windows. Then, the expansive entrance hall features high ceilings, larger-than-life brightly colored sculptures, giant cement crossbeams, and that's just the start. The hospital also boasts expansive gardens, interactive installations, and three expressive therapists – an art therapist, play therapist and music therapist.

Elizabeth Hendley, art therapist at Dell Children's, says she is amazed by how much art is on the walls and how open the hospital has been to the power of art to heal.

"I've worked in other hospitals, I lived in New York for a while, and the hospitals up there are pretty old and your typical hospital green walls," Hendley says. "They might have artwork but it's not a collection."

The art board at Dell Children's carefully selects the art, Hendley says, with hopes to showcase great work from all over. Coupled with the amount of natural light and the beautiful architecture, it doesn't feel like walking into a hospital.

The hospital also puts an artistic stamp on its fundraising efforts through Art of Giving, an annual event where local children and patients are invited to create works of art for hospital sponsors. The event aims to teach the children about philanthropy and giving back to the community. Held in early April, this year's event raised more than \$50,000, almost twice as much as last year's \$27,000, Hendley says.

But assisting with the planning of the fundraiser is nothing like her day-to-day duties. Armed with art supplies, she visits with patients throughout the hospital, hoping she can provide comfort and normalcy, or get them to express their feelings, which can be especially hard if a child has suffered a trauma or injury (See Sidebar: Art Therapy).

“It’s hard to talk about, hard to get words out about it, and art is just an easier way to get it out, and maybe that will facilitate more verbalization about it,” Hendley says. “They don’t have to talk about it if they don’t want to. It just depends on where they are in that process.”

Expressive therapies, including art therapy, treat a part of the person that is not necessarily medical, but is emotional and spiritual, she says. More than that, art on the walls helps people feel comfortable, especially if they’re in a stressful, and possibly frightening, hospital environment.

“You can’t really heal as well when you’re freaked out,” Hendley says. “I think art just helps. From the very moment you walk into a building, it has this effect of calming or fascinating, or helping you to see something new and different and happy.”

She adds, “I don’t think it’s so powerful that it alleviates all negative feelings, but it certainly helps.”

Despite the evidence that hospitals should be more mindful of art and the healing environment, it’s not always their priority, Hendley says.

“The priority is getting these kids, adults well, but it’s a medical environment, we need to get these people in and out as quickly as possible and as healthy as possible, which is great,” she says. “But I think there’s a whole other component. You have to treat the whole person.”

Beyond the Pocketbook

Other Texas hospitals that have developed healing arts program include Seton Medical Center Hays in Kyle, Texas, which opened in 2009. It was “designed to be a comforting environment to promote healing and health” and is home to more than 400 works of art,

according to the hospital's website. Compared to Seton Medical Center Austin, Hays makes "you feel like you're in an elegant place," Darling says.

At Texas Children's Hospital West Campus in Houston, artist Larry Crawford has painted more than 25 murals in procedure rooms, according to a February 2014 article in the Memorial Examiner. The hospital paid Crawford \$350 a day, and the projects, which range from ocean to NASA themed, cost \$25,000 and were funded by local groups and businesses. Impressed by his work, the hospital also hired him to paint murals at the Texas Children's campus in the Houston medical center.

More recently, University Hospital in San Antonio opened its Sky Tower in April, which features more than 1,200 works of art throughout all 10 floors of the facility. The healing arts program is unique to South Texas, according to a May 2014 KSAT-TV report, and cost one percent of the Sky Tower's budget, or about \$8 million.

To Darling, Dell Children's and similar healing arts programs are great examples of blending art and healing, but he notes that they spotlight a gap developing between adult and child healthcare in Austin.

"For whatever reason nobody's continuing the connection that those same adjustments need to be made in an adult hospital, for one, because adults are big kids, and two, we're much more aware of our sickness and our infirmity and our surroundings than kids are," Darling says. With his project, he hopes to address this gap.

To others, however, murals throughout Seton could be problematic.

Cody Aarons, a registered nurse at Houston Methodist Hospital, did his capstone project at Seton Medical Center Austin in fall 2013 while he was still a nursing student at the University of Texas at Austin. He describes rooms at both Seton and Houston Methodist as fairly monotonous, but says he's on the fence in considering the possibility of a large-scale mural project at either hospital because works on patient room walls could be

damaged or difficult to clean after a patient's stay, compared to a framed work that could be easily wiped down or replaced.

"I like the idea of large works of art in the hallways but not in the patient rooms because of the risk of getting dirty," Aarons says. "I would also be concerned that a large work of art such as a mural could look dated after a few years."

But Darling believes one of the pros of mural work, as opposed to canvas, is that he can touch up the work every six months, or as needed. He says the works will be more "inferior to the patients" than an expensive canvas or framed piece so there will be fewer worries about damage to the artwork.

"In a hospital, it's almost like making someone feel inferior, putting something up that if you touch it, or happen to poke it with your IV pole because you're so weak, now you busted this piece and it can't be replaced," Darling says.

"It doesn't make sense to put something that valuable up, as opposed to doing something nice, big and in the background that is pretty, calming and inferior to the patients."

As his project develops, Darling plans to expand to pieces painted on ceiling tiles for patients who are being transported by stretcher, as well as pieces that include inspirational sayings at wheelchair and stretcher height on walls and pieces on reclaimed hospital room doors.

He also hopes to get more artists involved and show that Austin-area hospitals can develop healing arts programs at little cost by turning to local artists.

"It all comes down to the people who make decisions to make good decisions and think about people as opposed to pocket books," Darling says.

Sidebar: Research

Behind healing arts projects at hospitals, there is a wealth of supporting research. A number of studies show how a hospital's environment can affect patients' healing and art's role in the process.

Art has long been used to heal. Ancient Greeks provided for the sick and injured in temples devoted to Aesculapius, the Greek god of healing. There, patients were surrounded by nature, art, music and beautiful architecture, according to a 2008 article in *Oncology Issues* on healing through evidence-based design.

Thousands of years later, Florence Nightingale wrote about patients' environmental needs in her 1859 book "Notes on Nursing." She recognized a need for greater patient comfort in order to facilitate better health and healing through direct sunlight, bright-colored flowers and peaceful surroundings.

Then came Roger Ulrich's 1984 study that found that postoperative gall-bladder patients who had rooms with views of nature fared better than patients who had rooms with views of a brick wall. The patients with the view of nature "had shorter postoperative hospital stays, had fewer negative evaluative comments from nurses, took fewer moderate and strong analgesic doses, and had slightly lower scores for minor postsurgical complications." He concluded that the findings implied hospitals should better take into account the quality of a patient's view.

Ulrich's study was a landmark, according to Kathy Hathorn and Upali Nanda, authors of "A Guide to Evidence-Based Art," a paper written for the Center for Health Design's Environmental Standards Council in 2008.

In the paper, the pair explore existing research on how art can improve healthcare, including a 1992 study that found that exposure to wall murals resulted in a decrease in pain intensity and anxiety by burn patients. And, according to a 1990 study, heart-rate

recordings showed that stress in a dental clinic was lower on days when a large mural hung in the waiting room. In another 1990 study, images of nature mounted to the ceiling lowered the blood pressure of “highly stressed” pre-surgical patients on gurneys.

Dr. Esther Sternberg, research director of the Center for Integrative Medicine and founding director of the Institute on Place and Wellbeing at the University of Arizona, experienced such a reduction of pain and stress after being exposed to pleasant views. She documents her experience in the 2009 documentary “The Science of Healing,” which Aaron Darling, the artist and nurse behind the Aaron Darling Beautification Project, credits as part of his inspiration.

In the film, Sternberg examines the role of the environment in the healing process, detailing a trip to Crete, Greece, where she found that the beautiful and relaxing scenery reduced the pain and swelling caused by her inflammatory arthritis. She concluded that the pleasant visuals helped reduce stress and boosted the immune system.

During a TEDx Talk on healing spaces in December 2013 in Tucson, Ariz., Sternberg noted that while one environment may offer relaxation, another may be stressful due to noise, crowding, too much or too little light, foul odors or a maze-like layout.

“Does that remind you of any kind of particular building? How many of you associate a hospital with a calming healing spa?” she asked the audience. “My goal and our goal at the University of Arizona Institute on Place and Wellbeing is to come to a point when I can ask that question to an audience and I don’t get a laugh.”

As well as reducing pain and stress, art has been shown to increase patient satisfaction. In a 2002 study in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* that looked at six different hospitals, 380 inpatients were interviewed after being discharged to determine what role the hospital environment played in their overall satisfaction with their stay. Elements of satisfaction included interior design, architecture, remodeling or construction, parking, ambient environment and social features, such as having a private room or accommodations for visitors.

Hospital interior design was the most common feature mentioned by respondents, and comments about the décor most often focused on the artwork, or lack thereof, researchers found. “It would be nice if they had more pictures,” one participant mentioned.

But it can’t just be any art. A number of studies have also found that the type of visuals, or style of art, can affect patients.

In a 2004 report to the Center for Health Design, Ulrich and research teams from Texas A&M University and Georgia Tech examined the role of the physical environment in hospitals of the 21st century. They found more than 600 studies on how hospital design can impact clinical outcomes, including how art depicting nature can improve quality of healthcare.

Research suggests patients respond better to representative nature art than abstract art, which can actually increase stress and worsen outcomes, according to a 1991 study of psychiatric patients. The patients had negative reactions to artwork that was “ambiguous, surreal, or could be interpreted in multiple ways,” compared to feeling positive around paintings and prints of scenes from nature.

Another study surveyed 300 randomly selected inpatients and revealed that they consistently preferred images of nature to abstract art.

Coupled with the growing amount of evidence-based design research, almost half of hospitals in the U.S. have arts programs, according to a 2004 survey conducted by the Society for the Arts in Healthcare and the National Endowment for the Arts. Of the 2,000 hospitals reported, 96 percent of the arts programs were intended to “serve patients directly,” and 55 percent also focused on hospital staff and reducing stress and fatigue.

In the 2004 paper, Hathorn and Nanda estimated that of the \$41 billion healthcare construction industry \$200 million would be spent on art for new hospitals that year.

Sidebar: Art Therapy

Art's health benefits go beyond its presence. Positive effects also extend to the creation of art by patients and the field of art therapy, a tool a number of local health professionals are using to help heal.

“I think we all benefit with some kind of art in the world, regardless of whether it's therapeutic or creative,” says Laura Johnson, an Austin-based counselor and art therapist. “As we learn more about the mind and the brain, and people do more and more art therapy research, we're just going to keep seeing that it benefits people, cognitively, emotionally.”

Johnson, who runs her own practice, is one of a handful of Austin-area certified art therapists. She is also president of the South Texas Art Therapy Association, a chapter of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) with about 100 members from across the state.

Art therapy involves patients or clients using painting, drawing or other art forms and the creative process to heal. Facilitated by an art therapist, creating art projects and discussing the process and results can be used by patients to explore feelings, overcome emotions, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve overall well-being, according to the AATA's website.

Studies have shown that art therapy helps patients with a variety of different ailments, both physiological and psychological. A 2007 study published in *Psycho-Oncology*, which studied 60 cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy, found that art therapy improved their depression and fatigue levels. It has also been shown to reduce cancer patients' nausea, according to a 2006 study.

Benefits extend to patients with dementia, who experience an increase in quality of life and reduced stress after participating in art therapy sessions, a 2011 case study found. The positive effects also extend to the patients' caregivers.

Children with asthma experience similar benefits, according to a 2010 study in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*. Researchers found that children with asthma experienced reduced anxiety and increased quality of life after studying 22 children who participated in one-hour art sessions at least once a week for seven weeks.

Other studies demonstrate that art therapy can be used in every day stress relief. Art projects were proven to be a viable anxiety reduction tool for college students in a 2010 study. And, in 2007 a randomized study of 50 adults between the ages of 18 and 30 found that creating a work of art can "produce dramatic reductions in negative mood."

Although it's not the best fit for all of her patients, Johnson uses art therapy as a technique in her practice, especially with younger children who are dealing with divorce. The feelings the children have, she says, are often ones that they cannot put into words or talk to their parents about because of conflict or tension.

"I think those children really benefit from art because it becomes a sacred space where they can be creative, express their feelings, talk about their dreams," Johnson says.

Hospitals and current culture, however, may not realize the same importance of art, she says.

"In general, I don't think that we live in a culture that really values art and artists," Johnson says. "It's not part of the curriculum. At this time, kids probably out of fifth grade may never even have another art class."

Elizabeth Hendley, art therapist at Dell Children's Medical Center of Texas in Austin, has also seen how creating art affects patients.

One of her patients, in recovery from a suicide attempt, wasn't sure what to draw. Hendley suggested a tree. The result was beautiful, with vibrant colors in the background, a large sun, and birds flying off into the distance while three eggs rested in a nest at the top of the tree. One thing immediately caught Hendley's eye: a large hole in the center of the tree.

Although she was trained not to assume anything about an artwork, Hendley says a tree can serve as a timeline of a patient's life and a large hole is often sign of a significant event, either positive or negative, in their life. As they discussed the drawing, Hendley found that the patient suffered a trauma halfway through their life – the center of the tree – and the realization of what it represented allowed them to open up about their fears.

“[The patient] was able to see all of these things in a picture that you would never think negatively about,” Hendley says.

Another patient was suffering from Chiari malformations. The condition is caused by structural defects in the cerebellum, the part of the brain that affects balance, according to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. Because the malformations can cause buildups of spinal fluid, the levels of fluid must be monitored often.

Hendley and the patient's mother found that the child's levels of spinal fluid were normal while the child created art, but when they stopped to talk or anything else, the fluid levels would spike, Hendley says.

“That was very measureable evidence that something good was happening,” she says.

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