

# ArtWorks for Cancer Foundation:

*helping transform treatment spaces into warm, hopeful, healing places for cancer patients, families and health care workers*

by Stuart Foxman



*Snake Rock, Otter Lake, by Philip Craig, is among the many works that have been donated to the ArtWorks for Cancer Foundation since 2017. The painting graces the wall of the Betty and Buster Lockwood Cancer Centre, Queensway Health Centre.*

Imagine heading home after a long shift, stepping inside your front door, and gazing at walls that contain... nothing. Just stark white or dull beige, and blank space along every hallway and around every room.

That's not how most people live. But it's how hospitals tend to look. Dr. Michael Weinberg wants to change that. He's the founder of the not-for-profit ArtWorks for Cancer Foundation (AWFC), which aims to bring art to cancer treatment units. The goal: transform these clinical areas into warm, hopeful and healing spaces.

"It's about the patient experience," says Dr. Weinberg, Chief of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at Trillium Health Partners in Mississauga. "I think of art as a weapon against cancer. It humanizes the environment."

AWFC accepts donations of artwork, and provides them free to hospitals seeking to enhance their treatment spaces. The foundation, which is run by

volunteers, works with hospitals around selection, design and installation.

Since 2017, AWFC has placed nearly 400 works of art (total value of approximately \$650,000) in the Greater Toronto Area, and envisions increasing that to 3,000 across Ontario. The preferred subject matter is landscape or still life. Sculptures and photographs are also welcome.

For instance, Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre has 42 pieces at the Odette Cancer Centre. The Baruch/Weisz Cancer Centre at North York General Hospital also installed 81 artworks. Trillium Health Partners has 151 pieces at their Credit Valley Hospital and Queensway Health Centre sites (Carlo Fidani Regional Cancer Centre; Michele

S. Darling Women's Imaging and Assessment Centre; Betty and Buster Lockwood Cancer Treatment Centre; Betty Wallace Women's Health Centre). And Lakeridge Health in Oshawa has 85 artworks at the R.S. McLaughlin Durham Regional Cancer Centre.

Dr. Weinberg is an art collector himself, and serves on the board of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection. He has even taken medical students and residents to the McMichael, asking them to describe what they see and how the art makes them feel.

To Dr. Weinberg, thinking about the emotions and motivations behind art mirrors, in a way, how doctors should relate. "When you talk to patients, you have to get under the surface," he says. "Don't just focus on the cancer; what about the person?"

## Healing Power

How have patients reacted to the AWFC donations? "The effects of a cancer diagnosis are as much psychological as they are physical," wrote a patient named D.J. "It's amazing how much healing power exists in the pieces you've chosen to display."

Others, like Joanne Petrie, appreciate finding art in an unexpected place where inspiration is needed most. Petrie was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2014. In June 2019, she completed her fifth year of care at Credit Valley Hospital. "The good days outnumber the bad," she says.

When she started, the cancer centre was traditional clinical white, with empty walls. "Walking into a bare, spare environment isn't very hopeful," says Petrie.

Earlier this year, she encountered the new artwork at Credit Valley. "The difference was incredible, with beautiful canvasses to draw you along the hallways," says Petrie, who also serves on

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*Patient D.J.*

the Patient and Family Advisory Council for Oncology at Trillium Health Partners.

Petrie immediately felt more serene. She says when you enter a hospital for cancer treatment, so many thoughts are swirling: your health, family, finances. Seeing artwork has genuine therapeutic benefits.

“The hospital is more inviting and warm. You say, ‘Maybe I’m in a safe place and am going to get through this.’ It helps to reduce stress,” Petrie says.

She was particularly soothed by a painting called “Fluking” by artist Barbara Howard. It depicts a whale’s tail, poised to dive, with many hues of blue and splashes of green. It reminded her of a trip she and her husband took to Tofino, B.C., pre-diagnosis, when they saw whales preparing for migration. The painting stopped Petrie in her tracks.

“That was a beautiful day and a wonderful holiday,” Petrie recalls. “We had no idea what was coming into our lives. Seeing the painting brought back those memories. I said, ‘I hope my visit today is positive, because we’re going to see whales again.’ The canvas gave me hope and an incentive.”

This summer, after five years of living with cancer, she had another memorable trip to Gros Morne, Newfoundland: “I saw my whales,” says Petrie.

Apart from injecting some soul into the surroundings, art can have measurable clinical and biological impacts.

Studies have shown that patients who view art in a hospital or during treatment report less anxiety and pain. Research into the art-health link focuses on indicators like length of hospital stay, medication intake, blood pressure and heart rate.

You never know how artwork might affect someone, in body and spirit. That’s why its presence is so important, says Dr. Sudha Rajagopal, an oncologist at Trillium Health Partners and an AWFC volunteer.

She says the works on display allow everyone to take a breath and

feel uplifted. That’s true as well for the doctors, nurses and all staff, who Dr. Rajagopal says have commented. The prime beneficiaries remain the patients, for whom the artwork evokes feelings of comfort and optimism.

“What we do in treatment, medication and radiation therapy is a tiny part of the patient’s journey,” says Dr.

Rajagopal. “Having art in the space can make a huge difference in their sense of well-being.”

For more information on the ArtWorks for Cancer Foundation, or how to donate your art, visit <http://artworksforcancer.com/>. ■

*Stuart Foxman is a Toronto-based writer.*



*Above: workers install The Channel, 2018, by Phillip Craig, at R.S. McLaughlin Durham Regional Cancer Centre, Lakeridge Health Centre. Below: several donated works of art, including Right Whale, Morning Light, by the Artistic Estate of Barbara Howard, have been installed at the Carlo Fidani Regional Cancer Centre, Credit Valley Hospital.*

