

ART SMART



# ARTFUL HEALING

WRITTEN BY DARRIN LITTLE



Some kids don't have it so easy. Kids like 15-year-old Asia Thompson, who was born with Sickle-Cell Anemia. A congenital blood disorder characterized by chronic fatigue and pain, Sickle-Cell Anemia strikes one out of every 500 hundred African American children born (as opposed to one out of every 36,000 Hispanic American children born). There is no cure. Asia's expected life span is 48 years, and will be punctuated with an increased risk of stroke, high blood pressure, various infections in her bones and spleen, blindness and heart failure.

At Miller Children's Hospital in Long Beach, where Asia has been many times before and sits now with an oxygen tube in her nose and an I.V. drip in her right hand, this brave youth seems surprisingly oblivious to these hard facts of her life. She fidgets in her chair, happy to talk but anxious to get back to her place in line for a computer station inside the Hematology/Oncology Playroom.

In this playroom, this vital oasis of artistic warmth and nurturing, sick children forget their troubles as they exchange laughs and much-needed bright solidarity around activity tables covered in decaled pages of red hearts, forests of brightly-colored pens and pencils, Xeroxed cartoons, scissors, tape and glue. These familiar emblems of basic crafts offer visual and thematic relief from the sterile, institutional language of hospital rooms. Today's creative mission: Valentine's Day greeting cards, most exuding radiant salutations and wishes in scrawled fonts and forms that children invent and adult artists imitate (with envy). Asia says the best thing about the playroom experience is the shared happiness; the group imperative that she feels to not be down, but to be happy.

This is the fundamental purpose of The Artful Healing Program here at MCH; an art-based, hands-on regiment of creative play and production that lifts the hospitalized child's (and his or her parents') spirits in order to bolster a healthy recovery. Directed by Denise Clayton-Leonard, official

Artist-In-Residence and dedicated teacher/shepherd to these ever-changing, critical recovery flocks for the past eight years, the whole program owes its inception to a community outreach initiative issued by The Long Beach Museum of Art back in 2000.

The development of this much-needed program mirrors established and successful art therapy strategies implemented at Stanford Hospital in California and Texas Children's Hospital in Houston. Emphasizing the integration of the arts into life, which can bring "the healing power of the arts to people who are suffering," Artful Healing Workshops here at MCH and proxies across the country make an enormous difference in the challenged lives of convalescent children who hunger for stimulation, encouragement and pain relief. Applied art practice may have indeed reached its high-water mark here as a positive, life-affirming force that, in many cases, can actually be attributed to saving lives. Doctors agree that a patient's emotional state and mental attitude frequently play a significant role in treatment and recovery success rates.

Denise hands me a 2009 Children's Desk Calendar featuring the work of a dozen kids. Rifling through the pages offering a color reproduction of a child's drawing, painting or scissored collage—I notice each young artist's portrait-in-miniature photograph at the bottom of the page, some accompanied by quotes. "I drew stars because I really love stars and they make me feel peaceful," says 15-year-old Stephanie, July's creative sponsor, about her celestial-themed, Acrylic paint-on-plexiglass creation. August's calendar page offers a collaged beachfront scene and quote by 20-year-old Catalina, pictured sitting upright and victorious at her worktable with a neon-dyed shock of red-haired exuberance: "Creating art really helped me forget about my pain." ■

Photos courtesy of Miller Children's Hospital  
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