

Healing Arts program brightens young patients' hospital visits

Young Audiences brings smiles to faces of children in treatment

By Everett Evans | March 24, 2015

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The Apollo Quartet's Matthew Detrick performs at Texas Children's Cancer Center as Tasia Green, 9, listens. The Young Audiences' Healing Arts program sends performing arts groups and artists to entertain and interact with young patients undergoing treatment and their families.



More Information

recent morning at the **Texas Children's Hospital** Cancer Center, the waiting room housed the customary cast of characters for such a setting: young patients with an

How to help Young Audiences of Houston relies on volunteers and professional artists for its variety of programs. For more information call 713-520-9267 or visit yahouston.org.

accompanying parent, medical staff and others involved in providing treatment or running the facility.

But there also was something less expected - four string musicians, moving through the area, playing folk tunes from around the world.

Not long into the quartet's 45-minute program, just about anyone present would agree the energetic performance made the morning a bit brighter.

For children who are hospitalized or undergoing treatment, anything that provides momentary diversion and lifts the spirit is welcome. Through its Healing Arts program, Young Audiences of Houston brings the arts to children at area hospitals and treatment centers. It may be a performance in a public area, such as the Apollo Quartet's recent concert described above, or it may be a solo artist or storyteller's visit to an individual patient's hospital room.

Melissa Batchelder experienced the Healing Arts program's impact during her daughter Laurel's year of weekly treatments at Texas Children's Hospital.

"Laurel's visits sometimes were just a few hours, sometimes a 24-hour stay," Batchelder says. "If there was something that day from Young Audiences, you could see it absolutely got the kids' minds off why they were there - whether it was a dance troupe, musicians, a puppeteer, or an artist who made art while talking to the children. For some, maybe they'd been there since eight in the morning, and that was the first time they smiled all day."

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Batchelder says her daughter was particularly taken with a puppeteer.

"Her eyes lit up and she asked, 'When I get home, can I put on a puppet show for you?' That was one of the happiest days she had at the clinic."

Laurel, who was 3 when diagnosed with a tumor, is now four years out of treatment and disease-free.

Young Audiences of Houston was founded in 1956 to advance the arts in education and bring arts programs to children in schools. It launched the Healing Arts program in 2000, to reach children who are hospitalized or undergoing medical treatment - circumstances that can keep them out of school for extended periods.

Initially, the Healing Arts partnership was only with Texas Children's Hospital Cancer and Hematology Center. In 2010, it expanded to add Shriner's **Hospital for Children in Houston and Ronald McDonald House**, and in 2014, added the **University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center Children's Cancer Hospital**.

While programs for schools still make up the majority of Young Audiences' operation, the Healing Arts program now constitutes about 20 percent to 25 percent of its activities, said **Mary Mettenbrink**, Young Audiences' executive

director.

"The arts enrich children's lives," Mettenbrink says. "For children undergoing medical treatment, they can bring joy and relaxation, provide a creative outlet, help manage pain, and give hope and positive memories, both for the children and their caregivers."

Young Artists, which has a core staff of eight, each year works in partnerships with some 150 artists who take their programs to schools and hospitals. In all its programs combined, Young Audiences serves about 207,000 children annually. About 1,300 are children served through Healing Arts, by more than 30 artists performing about 150 programs each year.

The hospital programs and visits are modified to suit the setting, flexible enough to accommodate changing circumstances. Especially if an artist is crafting a one-on-one visit to a patient's hospital room, medical personnel will help tailor the activity to that child.

Whitney Bullock is education director of **Apollo Chamber Players** and violist with the group's string quartet. She says their program about the influence of folk music upon classical composers is a favorite for both schools and hospital visits.

"Performing in a hospital waiting room is a unique challenge," Bullock says, "because you don't have all of the audience through the entire performance. Some may have to leave halfway through it, and others will just be arriving then. It has to be something they can appreciate, whatever portion they hear. This program is good because it has different short pieces from different countries we get to tell about."

The group includes spirit-lifting and up-tempo pieces, such as the folk tune "Malaguena," which Bullock notes "always makes a hit with kids. They especially like it when (violinist) **Matthew Detrick** walks about the room playing his solo part. They giggle at the silences and clap during the fast rhythmic parts."

Bullock sees first-hand the impact of taking young patients' minds off their health-related anxieties.

"It's telling when you have kids who, at the start, are obviously not happy to be there," Bullock says. "Then, during the performance you see their faces blossom, or notice their body language shifting. Or they raise their hands to ask questions. We get feedback from parents thanking us, saying we've made the situation more tolerable for their child. And we get nurses and other staff people coming by to listen, too."

Bullock says it feels good to know she can do something to brighten a child's day.

"We're constantly bombarded with the notion that classical music is becoming obsolete," Bullock says. "When I play as we did at Texas Children's and see how the music affects them, it lets me know what we do is not obsolete - it's absolutely relevant."

Young Audiences generates most of the funding for its programs and partnerships through local philanthropy and its annual gala. Major supporters of the Texas Children's Hospital Arts in Medicine Program include the **Periwinkle Foundation**. Other benefactors contribute resources: **Houston Young Lawyers Foundation** gave art materials and digital equipment for Young Audience's partnership at M.D. **Anderson Children's** Cancer Hospital.

"As a physician, I always find it incredible to observe the healing power the arts have on hospitalized children," says Dr. **William Cohn**, of the **Texas Heart Institute** at St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital. "I often interact with patients who are struggling with a complicated diagnosis and the arts give them an avenue of creative expression while helping them cope. The work they are doing needs to be continued."

Cohn, also a blues musician and arts-in-education supporter, is being honored at the organizations May 7 gala as an innovator at combining arts with other fields.

The goal of this year's gala is to raise \$100,000 for its programs, including Healing Arts.

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