

# The Language of Hope and Courage

*Colorful bits of torn paper help patients at Children's Hospital tell their wordless stories with hope and courage.*

A 2-year-old girl ripped bits of paper and glued the pieces into stacks, spaced near each other.

"These are my people," she declared.

Another girl re-created her family by forming floral shapes, called "Lyla flowers," named after herself. She made one for her daddy, mommy and the most colorful blossom for her baby brother, who was sick at Children's Hospital at OU Medicine.

These are among the contributions in a yearlong, collaborative therapeutic arts project at the hospital led by artist-in-residence Ginna Dowling.

"The Language of Hope and Courage" asks patients, their families and hospital staff to tear paper into symbols of self-representation, what Dowling calls "identity glyphs." These handmade hieroglyphics are displayed throughout the hospital.

"It's a community project. It connects people and allows them to talk about themselves," Dowling says. "It's a marvelous opportunity and empowers people. It has been extraordinarily powerful."

Dowling, who holds an OU Master of Fine Arts and is a contemporary printmaker and installation artist, started focusing on hieroglyphics when she explored megalithic art in Ireland during an artist-in-residency. Her pieces use symbols as a form of communication across different mediums.



BY GINNIE GRAHAM  
PHOTOS BY TRAVIS DOUSSETTE



Bailee Edwards holds up an image she made of herself from torn paper for “The Language of Hope and Courage” exhibition.

Her work is included in the permanent collection at the Oklahoma City Museum of Art and has been exhibited internationally and locally at the Oklahoma Capitol, Oklahoma Contemporary, MAINSITE in Norman, OU’s Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art and The Hardesty Arts Center in Tulsa.

Dowling has taught this approach in places such as after-school programs for homeless children and inner-city art camps. The manager of Oklahoma Contemporary Showroom Showcase, who was a Children’s Hospital volunteer, suggested she host a workshop at the hospital, homeless shelters or camps for children with incarcerated parents. A Children’s Hospital volunteer also suggested she host a workshop at the hospital.

She met with administrators in October 2018 about what she thought would be a small-scale, one-time project. Then, she received a \$15,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts through the Mid-America Arts Alliance. Other funding came from the Kirkpatrick Family Fund and The Children’s Hospital Volunteers charity.

“It was like a snowball,” Dowling says.

The project expanded and launched in July 2019 and will continue through June 2020. The result will be permanent installations of the grouped hieroglyphics re-mastered in vinyl.

“It will tell their stories and that of their parents, siblings, support staff and the medical community. It’s the story of everyone and the entire hospital. This is definitely the story of a community,” Dowling says.

“People coming into the hospital will see themselves on that wall in their community.”

The intended therapeutic aspect is to forge stronger bonds between patients and their support systems and strengthen sick children going through treatment and recovery. But, those bonds had been difficult to measure, until Dowling discovered hope theory developed by OU-Tulsa’s Dr. Chan Hellman.

Discussions are under way for the Children’s Hospital art project to undergo a hope-centered evaluation.

“What I’d like to do is empower the arts. If we can do something like put a scientific measure to it, it goes to credibility,” Dowling says. “Hope is setting goals and developing paths and willpower to reach those goals. This project creates the pathways for that, for children to achieve hope.”

From her one-on-one interaction with patients and staff, Dowling believes the project has been a success.

A hospitalized preteen was brought into the art room not in the mood for creativity. Dowling used her teasing manner to prompt the adolescent into mentioning something, anything.

Out of a little rebellion, the youth tore a piece of paper, haphazardly tossed it onto the table, and said, “Here, it’s a snail.” The artist took their discussion into a goofy place about the lives of snails.

“I respected his sense of humor, and he got so into it,” Dowling says. “When he put his snail shelf on the wall, he stood back and was very proud of it. He came back with different people to see it. He loved his piece.”

Dowling chose to have all participants tear paper to level the field among abilities, but some patients still struggle.

One young boy was frustrated by his physical limitations to rip the paper. Dowling gave encouragement by talking him through it and making a symbol alongside him.

Finally, the child figured it out.

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“This is definitely the story of a community,” artist-in-residence Ginna Dowling says of the project, which is close to her heart and will become a permanent installation at Children’s Hospital.

Young patients like Bentley Hammond tell the story of themselves and their families and strengthen bonds with hospital staff by participating in the arts project. ▶

“That was one of those ‘wow’ moments. He was so excited, and it was powerful,” Dowling says.

Hope theory will gauge how those moments make an overall impact in well-being. Dowling worries about public funding to the arts being the first cut from schools and other community institutions. It’s why she welcomes scientific validation.

“Arts are good for the human mind and body. If statistics and data can show that, it would help improve funding, or at least keep it stable,” Dowling says.

This project has another layer of meaning for the artist.

About two decades ago, her then 6-year-old son was treated at Children’s Hospital after a near-fatal allergic reaction to peanuts. He is now an adult, healthy and working in graphic design and social media.

“I have a special bond with the project, and this comes full circle for me,” Dowling says. “These kids are amazing. They don’t let their illnesses define them. They come in and work with every inch of their being.”

