

# ARTS IN HEALTHCARE: CREATIVITY FOR THE POWERLESS

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*Always laugh when you can. It is cheap medicine.*  
-Lord Byron

## Introduction

George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron (1788-1824), was born with a crippling congenital clubfoot deformity. As a poet, Lord Byron may have been among the first to turn to the literary arts to exorcise his powerlessness over lifelong lameness. The post-Impressionist painter Henri de Toulouse Lautrec (1864-1901) was afflicted with the brittle bone disease of pycnodysostosis, and he sustained bilateral femur fractures as a child that further diminished his genetically short stature. During his troubled life, he painted the cabarets, theatres, and brothels of the Montmartre quarter of Paris in garish colors. The celebrated and passionate painter Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) chronicled her polio and post-injury skeletal sufferings on canvas.<sup>1</sup> Over the last few decades, the international Arts in Healthcare movement has evolved in the medical community to harness the expressive power of dance, theatre performance, literature, music, and the visual arts to uplift the healing environment of the sick and injured.

These creative modalities of self-expression are beneficial to the recovery of patients and care givers alike.<sup>2</sup> Although once considered on the fringe of medicine, Arts in Healthcare programs have blossomed at scholarly institutions like Johns Hopkins, Stanford, Dartmouth, and Vanderbilt. The National Endowment for the Arts ([http://www.arts.gov/resources/Accessibility/artsnHealth\\_top.html](http://www.arts.gov/resources/Accessibility/artsnHealth_top.html))

partners with the Society for Arts in Healthcare to guide institutions in building arts programs.<sup>3</sup> The author first experimented with this innovative modality in 1991, when his university orthopaedic clinic waiting room was in turmoil because of extensive renovations. To allay the family stresses of waiting in cramped quarters, the temporary plaster board walls of the construction site were covered with drawing paper, and crayons were provided to the pediatric patients and siblings (Figure 1). This simple tactic evaporated parent complaints during the remodeling, and the temporarily shrunken waiting room was adorned with imaginative drawings that preoccupied the busy pediatric artists and delighted passers-by.

Since 1995, the author's bluegrass band "Gainor & Friends" has been performing benefit concerts for the University of Missouri Children's Hospital. In recent years, a trio of vocalists from the band has been singing on the pediatric ward for kids and parents. These performances bring as much joy to the listeners as it does to the two non-medical working mothers from the band who join the author during these song fests.

## Showtime

At our first performance on the pediatric ward a few years ago, my two guest accompanists visibly tensed when we stepped before a gallery of hospital-wear faces. Wide-eyed toddlers mutely moored to intravenous lines sat close to their parents. Balding youngsters frail from chemotherapy watched us distractedly. A thin spinal fusion patient with shallow breathing slumped motionlessly in a wheelchair by his exhausted mother. A wary adolescent with a fresh sternal bandage and pained countenance sat with embarrassment next to a gurgling chest tube system that sprouted from his side. A masked teenager whose life was stymied by chronic disease listened politely to dispel hospital boredom. In show business circles, this is known as a tough crowd.

We kicked-off with "Old MacDonald had a Farm" to enlist the interest of the grammar school age group. A sing-along litany of livestock sounds from most of the Darwinian animal kingdom slowly captured their interest. The 6- to 12-year-old children were allowed to playfully roast their health care providers with invented rhyming couplets from "Down by the Bay Where the Watermelons Grow":

"Did you ever see a phlebotomist  
That looked like a hippopotamus?  
Did you ever see a doctor  
That looked like a helicopter?"



Figure 1. In 1991, Dr. Gainor encouraged pediatric patients and siblings to draw on the temporary walls of the orthopaedic waiting room while it was being renovated.

We concluded the song with: “Did you ever see a nurse/That looked like . . . an angel?” This was a political victory among the corps of nurses who wandered delicately among the patients tending their flock. Halfway through the concert, the thin spinal fusion patient in a wheelchair was rushed away to the restroom by his mother. Upon their return, the mother joyfully whispered to me that after his urgent call to nature was answered, the child excitedly gasped to her, “Mom, did you hear me sing?!”

The stand-offish teenage listeners were given a history quiz but were unable to correctly identify the first female U.S. astronaut in space (Sally Ride). This segued into the classic rock song “Mustang Sally,” and a 22-year-old patient with cystic fibrosis coached his younger peers through the choral refrain. This final song coaxed a smile to the pained face of the chest tube patient. The nervous mothers in my trio were now beaming, and a senior pediatric nurse confided approvingly to me, “Who doesn’t want to make a sick kid feel better?” At the end of the concert, the listeners were given Children’s Miracle Network T-shirts and free copies of my solo CDs that raise funds for our Children’s Hospital. It was the G&F Trio’s first foray into the inner sanctum of the pediatric ward, and my two guest vocalists were deeply touched by the special privilege of entertaining these sick children and their families (Figure 2). Both singers are working women, but through their musicianship and generosity of spirit, they were empowered to nurture the sick. My accompanists are no longer discomforted by the array of blinking and chirping medical devices to which our young listeners are attached. In subsequent performances, however, we no longer stand before the gallery of listeners, as we have learned to sit in a campfire circle of chairs and benches among the patients and parents. This more intimate interaction allows toddlers and siblings to crawl into the laps of the Trio’s singing mothers.

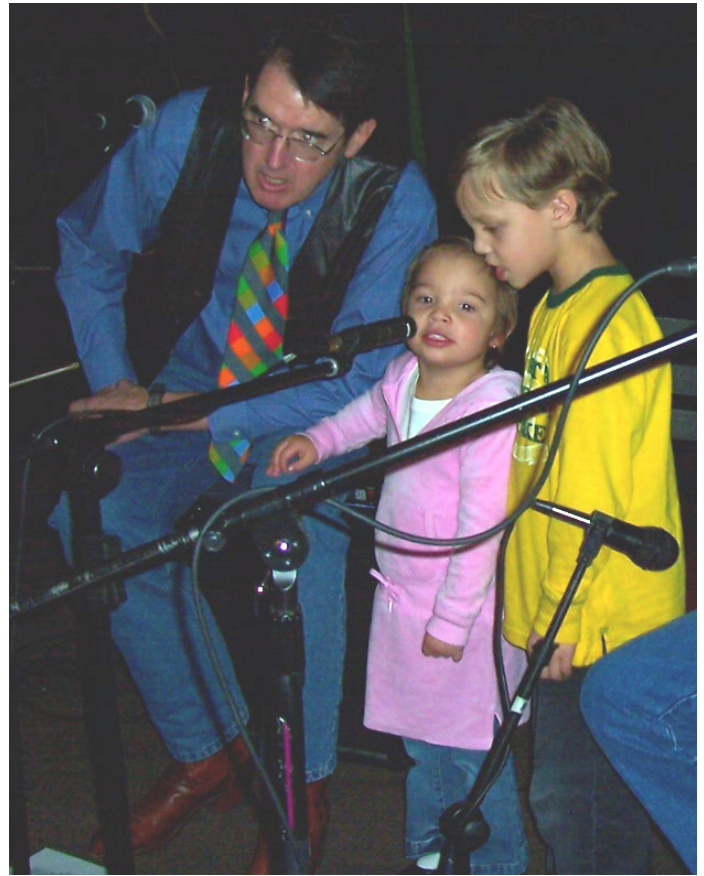


Figure 3. At its several evening concerts per year, the band has a pre-show sing-along for children, so the kids get home for bedtime.



Figure 2. The G & F Trio, consisting of the author and two non-medical working women, performs frequently on the pediatric ward for the children and grateful families.

### A Two-Way Street

Arts in Healthcare is a two-way street. Those who bring the arts to the sick become momentary caregivers and briefly share the rewards that come with being a healer. The members of the larger Gainor & Friends bluegrass band also share in this special mission. Although volunteer musicians, they show up for every monthly benefit performance at a local coffee house downtown. Over the years, we have donated many thousands of dollars in tips and fees to the Children’s Miracle Network. An alumnus band member who relocated elsewhere rejoins the group for a gig when visiting town. When the author is short-handed for band members during the summer vacation season, other musicians from local jam sessions gladly step onto the bandstand. It is not unknown for a substitute to discreetly apply for active membership in the group, but the band is blessed with a stable membership. All the musicians are non-medical people and enjoy being affiliated with supporting our local Children’s Hospital with their time and talent. It is an honor to be the bandleader of such benevolent and civic-minded citizens.

### Monthly Concerts

Our monthly noontime gig is at a local coffee shop that is used as a study hall by the ubiquitous university students in our town, and it is a mid-day lunch-stop for shopping mothers with their toddlers. The media take curious pride and interest in our community service via press stories and radio interviews. A local newspaper ranked our band among the top live acts in town.<sup>4</sup> My own patients study these media communications and ask me about our music in orthopaedic



Figure 4. The author's bluegrass band Gainor & Friends has been fundraising for the Children's Hospital since 1995. Dr. Gainor has sold hundreds of solo CDs of original music for the Children's Miracle Network.

clinic. This service work makes me more accessible to them, and they purchase my CDs each year at holiday time to support the Children's Hospital. The tunes on the discs are all original, and "The Bone Doctor Song" featuring singing children is a parent favorite. The house staff likes the funky blues "PGY-1 Man" because of its swaggering bravado. During our quarterly evening concerts, the band invites children, nurses, and doctors onto the stage for sing-alongs to share a sense of community (Figure 3). One fan videotaped our unsuspecting band during a performance, and we now chuckle to find ourselves on YouTube.

An immutable precept of service work is that you always receive more than you give. Evidenced by thankful e-mails, hand-written notes, and letters to my desk, the university hospital staff and faculty enjoy the novelty that one of its members embraces this work- and a bone doctor, no less. The band shares its music mostly because it is fun for all, but there is an almost indefinable and transformative personal dimension to Arts in Healthcare. Although the author prefers to distance spirituality and religion from the practice of medicine, former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. C. Everett Koop intones, "There are no atheists at the bedside of a dying child."<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

Although some critical ears may not hear bluegrass music as a higher art form, the G&F Trio's performances are designed to help children forget that they are sick, in a place that is often frightening, and under the care of strangers. Founded in 1991, the Society for Arts in Healthcare has an informative Web site ([www.thesah.org](http://www.thesah.org)). In 2007, University of Missouri Health Care inaugurated a guiding Arts in Healthcare committee composed of doctors, nurses, artists, and interested community members. Its online contact site is [www.muhealth.org/artinhealthcare/](http://www.muhealth.org/artinhealthcare/).

As a member of the committee, the author thanks the musicians who have enriched the lives of many children and their families with the gift of their service in Gainor & Friends (Figure 4). A special nod of appreciation is given to the two singing G&F Trio mothers who are empowered to venture into the inner sanctum of the pediatric ward to entertain sick children and their worried but courageous parents. For educators like the author, who teach the art and science of medical practice everyday, the interaction of these dual imperatives assumes new meaning with the advent of Arts in Healthcare.

### Acknowledgements

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