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Art for Healing brightens hospital rooms and raises spirits

Earl Pinchuk was working in bedding. Gary Blair runs a call centre and radio-paging company. Outside their working lives, these two men have started a revolution in the field of art.

They hope it will spread across Canada and into every hospital, hospice and shelter. While visiting a dying friend, Yves Larouche, in 2001, they were dismayed at the visually sterile hospital room that was to be his last environment. After Larouche's death, Pinchuk turned his 40th birthday bash into a fundraiser. With the resulting \$8,000, he had the impetus to establish the Art for Healing Foundation whose motto is "Nourish your soul and it shall soar."

The whole point of the foundation is that art has spiritual powers. "Our desire is that the art will contribute to the healing process in the sense that it will distract people from all the health reasons they're in the hospital. It gives them a focus outside of the disease they have, the condition they're suffering from or the procedure they're there for," Pinchuk said.

"But there's not much in a hospital budget for

putting things on the walls. That's why we felt there was a need for an outside organization like ours."

Pinchuk thought that rather than invest the entire initial sum in one original work for a hospital lobby, he'd infuse the entire building with art. Ren-Wil, a major distributor of reproductions in Canada, agreed to supply the partners with posters and framing at cost, and a huge, 9,000-work catalogue.

From the catalogue, long-term patients and donors to the foundation who have hands-on input can make their own selections, as long as they are appropriate to the mandate of healing art: images that evoke peaceful feelings and contemplation, and perhaps provide cheer

or whimsy. Pinchuk and Blair also educate, posting texts on the works and artists' lives.

The Montreal Children's Hospital (MCH) was the first to benefit from the foundation. The "Art Doctors," as they have affectionately become known, hung 100 reproductions in waiting rooms, hallways and seven special rooms.

"We found out about these rooms when we

first toured the hospital to get a visual layout for what is needed," says Blair. "Seven children live in the MCH year-round because of the nature of their illnesses that can't be treated at home. It was telling that they all chose beautiful outdoor scenes."

Pinchuk sold his family business in December to devote himself entirely to the foundation. Earlier, he took a year to work for an art gallery, an experience that provided him with another, unexpected source of art.

"After a show where only a few of these incredibly lovely paintings sold, I took the rest back to the artist's studio and felt I was driving a hearse. More so, when I got there and saw where they went [into storage]," Pinchuk notes.

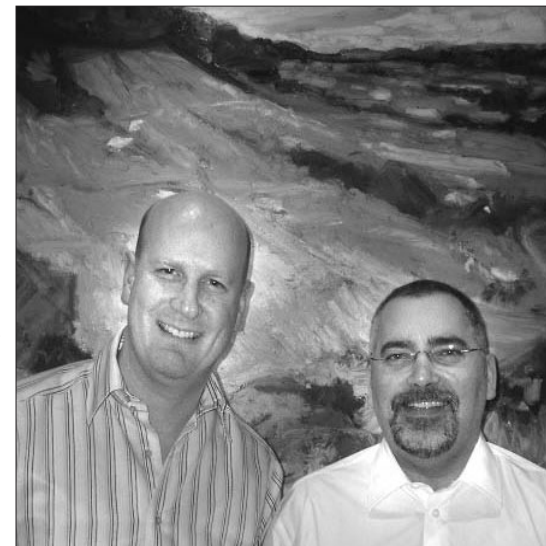
"There are so many artists who have been painting all their lives and are hanging onto hundreds of paintings."

He decided to approach artists and artists' estates, asking them to donate (for tax receipts) two to 20 original works, which would be shown in areas named in their honour and would include a biography. The response has been gratifying.

Shirley Marcovitz, sister of the late painter Bill Charad, donated oil paintings, aquarelles and charcoal sketches of Montreal and Canadian scenes, portraits and still lifes. They make up a fourth-floor gallery in the MCH.

Charles Leibovitch, who cares for his father Norman's 1,400-canvas legacy, made a sizeable donation. Rita Brianksy is honouring the memory of her late artist-husband Joseph Prezament.

Other hospitals are getting in on the act, now,



Earl Pinchuk (left) and Gary Blair are starting an art revolution in hospitals and schools.

[Heather Solomon photo]

with Irwin Browns ensuring the late printmaker Wendy Simon's place in perpetuity at the Royal Victoria Hospital. And producing artists are enchanted with the concept. Rita Cohen has donated two of her kaleidoscopic abstracts to the Montreal General Hospital.

The foundation is also working with the Jewish General Hospital, Maimonides Geriatric Centre and the Hôpital de Réadaptation Villa Medica, which

houses the burn-support group Helping Hand for Burn Survivors.

Pinchuk and Blair are about to take their foundation into schools, hanging reproductions of Canadian art with biographies, which will bolster the sadly reduced emphasis on the arts in the school curricula.

Children can also get involved in the foundation "to understand the notion of giving back to the community at a very young age," suggests Blair. "They can use some of their bar or bat mitzvah money, or their allowance, or have a bake sale and we'll work with them to select pieces, involve them in a particular project and they can talk to the kids and staff members at the hospitals and get one-on-one feedback about what their efforts have generated."

MCH audiology co-ordinator Louise Miller wrote to the Foundation: "Thanks to you, the children are walking into a friendly and fun place. You make our job easier by taking away some of their fears before we start assessing their hearing."

For more information, go to www.artforhealingfoundation.org.

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