

Unity Health Care Reading Room Gets a New Look

BY DEIDRE R. GANTT

Just about everyone remembers those childhood visits to the doctor's office. The thought of needles, fingertip pricks, bad-tasting medicine and big machines still unnerves many of us as adults. Unity Health Care's "key corner" concept strives to make the waiting time more useful and less stressful by promoting literacy among their youngest patients.

"We have been emphasizing for the last several years that literacy and health care go hand in hand," says Vincent Keane, Unity's president and executive director. In partnership with Reach Out and Read of Metropolitan DC, Unity has established key corners in several of its health centers, where celebrities and volunteers engage children in reading, storytelling and other creative activities. "It helps the child endure the vaccination," said Keane, "and on their visit, each of the children gets a book to take home." The importance of this small step in building positive reading experiences cannot be overlooked in a ward where nearly half of our neighbors over 16 are functionally illiterate.

Located on Benning Road NE, the East of the River health center is one of two Unity sites in Ward 7 and serves over 1,700 children each year. Last fall, when Audrey White, director of corporate and community relations for the Unity Health Care Foundation, wanted to improve the appearance of this center's key corner, she remembered a newsletter sent to her by Sherry Ways, principal designer of Design Scheme Interiors. "Based on their expertise with color therapy, feng shui and functional design, I knew that we could use them to make this small space a warm and inviting place for healing," White says.

Ways, also a Ward 7 Arts Collaborative board member, set out to transform the key corner by making it vibrant, organized, conducive to literacy and calming for the young patients. "Physical spaces can have a powerful influence on how children reach their full potential," says Ways. "We selected colors, patterns and textures to support children's growth and personality. Then we evaluated the best placement for furniture for children's literacy development."

In order to make the project a true community initiative, Ways consulted parents and children who visited the center and brought local painter and Arts Collaborative member William C. Howard Jr. on board to transform the plain, gray wall into a vivid, engaging



mural. "Reading is truly one of the keys to creative thought," says Howard, who includes a book about George Washington Carver as one of his childhood artistic influences. "This mural was created to challenge their imagination."

Ways' creativity and concern for improving the quality of life for Unity's pediatric patients captured the interest of Nika Stewart, executive director of the Decorators Alliance of North America. Stewart chose her proposal as one of three across the nation to receive a designers and decorators toolkit and Internet publicity from Project H.O.M.E., the Alliance's community outreach initiative. Additional sponsorship from IKEA, Eco-Green Living, and local developer City Interests enabled Ways to purchase colorful, kid-sized, environmentally safe furniture for the room. Two local arts groups, Authentic Art Consulting and Thick Art Collaborative, donated over 50 books for the key corner's giveaways.

On Sept. 17, staff and board members from Unity, the Arts Collaborative and sponsoring businesses, the design team and community residents cut the ribbon on the new mural and redesigned key corner. "They've turned the waiting room into something less clinical looking," said Stewart, who traveled from New Jersey to Washington to celebrate Project H.O.M.E.'s first completed project. "It looks more like a playroom with lots of fun furniture and fun, soothing colors." She praised Ways for being an inspiration to all of us: "You've proven to me that one person can make a very big difference. Even if one person can't physically do everything, just an idea in one person's mind can create something like this."

During the ceremony, Keane presented a "Volunteers Are Special People" award to Howard and Wanda Aikens, executive director of the Arts Collaborative. In her remarks, Aikens emphasized the importance of pictures and other visual art forms for children who are learning to recognize letters and words. She also expressed hope that other art-

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT.
 1. Interior designer Sherry Ways helps paint the new mural.
 2. Community partners from Unity Healthcare, the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative and Project H.O.M.E. cut the ribbon on the redesigned key corner at East of the River health center.
 3. Wanda Aikens and William C. Howard Jr. of the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative accept community award from Unity's Vincent Keane.
 Photos by Zandra Chestnut

ists, businesses and community organizations would follow this example and collaborate to create a legacy of community art that documents Ward 7's culture and skill for future generations.

In her final word of thanks on the Project H.O.M.E. blog, Ways revealed the secret to successful community partnership: "Without ego or fretting over 'who is the lead' or dropping out, you all showed unselfish dedication to this project. ... Though we had some bumps in the road, we saw it through. That is what life is all about, moving through difficulties and roadblocks in a dignified way, never being negative but always positive."

Read all of Sherry's updates and view more pictures of the East of the River key corner redesign project on Project H.O.M.E.'s blog: www.projecthome2008.blogspot.com. ★



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