



Pediatric Mural Project for
NY Presbyterian Hospital:
Hospital Staff Reaction.
Part 2 of a Series.

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MURALS BRIGHTEN NEW YORK HOSPITAL

By Georgette Gouveia
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It's opening night - more like opening afternoon - at the "Room of Magic" at the new Komansky Center for Children's Health in Manhattan. And while the guests of honor aren't decked out in Armani and Dolce & Gabbana, they're no less red-carpet worthy. Some arrive with IV bottles and tubes. Others, sporting Dora the Explorer slippers, are carried by their mothers. A few have no hair. But everyone wears a grin as cast members from the Broadway musical "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" go through their paces before a special screening of the animated movie "Cars."

Those smiles mirror the faces of the big kids outside the combination theater/ classroom - the doctors, nurses and other staffers enjoying the youngsters enjoying themselves.

The Elf Foundation in Hollywood and InnerSpace Electronics in Port Chester donated the "Room of Magic" to the Komansky Center, located at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center on the Upper East Side.

"What's not to like about this?" says Dr. Gerald M. Loughlin, the hospital's pediatrician-in-chief. (Or should that be appreciator-in-chief?) "I've got to see that musical."

At the center - a place where youth and illness perform a delicate pas de deux daily - there is a deep-seated appreciation among the staff for the transcendent power of the arts and especially for a man who's become a kind of an artist-in-residence there, Sparkill muralist James Kimak.

He's brought his signature multimedia, collage-like

approach to the abstract, mauve murals he's created for the "Room of Magic," evoking Radio City Music Hall and other New York movie palaces right down to the trompe-l'oeil suggestion of brass-trimmed doors.

"I wanted to give the feeling of being in a theater but not overwhelmingly so," he says at the opening.

The "Room of Magic" assignment was a late addition to a commission that has Kimak designing murals with a New York City theme for various sections of the Komansky Center. To date there are jazzy tributes to the institutions that make up Museum Mile in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit; lush, painterly scenes of Central Park in the Family Lounge; a crystalline skyline in the Pediatrics Procedures Suite, and the panoramic new East River Passageways in the Pediatrics Intensive Care Unit. Over the winter, Kimak will be bringing midtown to the 25 walls of the general pediatrics unit, the largest segment of the project, and then in the spring, Coney Island to the pediatrics Emergency Department. There may be more murals beyond these, he says.

There would be, if Mary Anderson had her way. She's been part of the hospital's housekeeping staff for five and a half years, a woman who once dreamed of being a nurse but found fulfillment in helping the nurses to help others.

"I just love it," she says, surrounded by images of the city's august museums in the neonatal unit. "It makes my day. It makes you want to do better. You see the brightness. It eases your spirit. You feel inspired."

As if on cue, Kimak arrives to photograph some of his work. Introduced to the muralist, Anderson says, "I just have to have a hug." And they embrace gently. Not that it's been all hugs and kisses.

"The problem with art is that not everyone agrees on what's beautiful," Loughlin says. That subjectivity is intensified by the mural itself, one of the most public of art forms. (See accompanying story.) For the staffers who've devoted their lives to the well-being of children, the Komansky Center isn't merely a public space. It's their home away from home for much of the

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day. There were a few reservations about how that home would be adorned.

"I had some trepidation," Claudette Theuriere, assistant nurse manager for the neonatal unit, says of her initial reaction to the plans for Kimak's murals. "I thought maybe they're going to be too busy."

It's a concern that Kimak himself had in designing the walls for the "Room of Magic." Either way, children aren't supposed to be concentrating on the murals.

"Here I wanted (the murals) to be discreet," he says.

Elsewhere, however, Kimak's mission has been to distract parents and patients alike.

"Being around kids is great fun, even when they're sick," says Loughlin, who wears a tie that's a childlike drawing of the world, a gift from one of his former patients. "They have such courage and spirit. Our work is to ... provide an environment in which they feel as good as they can in a hospital."

And that includes murals like the East River Passageways, with their fun facts, satellite maps, stick figures and whimsical pairings. (A drinking fountain has a view of Roosevelt Island.)

"Once they started going up, I got more positive about them," Theuriere says. "Every day I see something new in them. There's so much going on."

"During the day, I'll stop and I'll look," says neonatal staff nurse Shari Beatty.

"I didn't know about the Goethe-Institut," fellow neonatal staff nurse Carolyn Brandlein says of one of the Museum Mile murals.

For others, the pleasure is not in the discovery of the new but in the reassurance of the enduring.

"It makes me smile," says Dr. Susan B. Bostwick, the hospital's division chief of general pediatrics, who grew up in Tappan. "I love looking down the halls and seeing the colors. To me, they're friendly and cheerful They're not over the top and yet, they make me feel good.

"The murals make a statement," she adds. "They say that in this institution, we're taking care of children."