

Program gives young patients a place for artistic expression

San Diegan starts ARTS group after his mother dies of cancer

By Jenny Diamond

The young man tacked his watercolor paintings where his mother could see them from her bed. She loved his sailboats best. He stood beneath the boats when he made his promise. It was fall, the season her stomach cancer spread, when the doctors were so very sorry. The son moved closer to his mother where she lay in the living room, her new bedroom ever since the hospital bed arrived. "I'll be an artist with a cause, he promised her. I'll do art with children who are sick, children who might get

better, and children who might not. Matt D'Arrigo was 20 years old. Every day, D'Arrigo retreated to his room to paint the places where his mother would rather be. He spent what would have been his sophomore year in college at home in Boston. He took care of his mother and older sister, Kate, who found a strange lump the month their mother was diagnosed. The sister's lump was lymphoma, doctors said. D'Arrigo looked up the word in a dictionary. He earmarked "malignant" a few pages later. The chemotherapy worked for his sister. His mother died in 1992 after 10 months of chemotherapy and four surgeries. The boats came down from the living room walls.

SEE Art, B3



Rebecca Zatarain, 5, painted at San Diego Children's Hospital. ARTS program volunteers visit the hospital three days a week. K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune

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Man helped kids whose parents were in Iraq

D'Arrigo continued to paint. He finished his bachelor's degree in art and a few years later settled in San Diego, where he worked as a designer for an events-planning company. When his sister bought him a book on starting a nonprofit organization, he began to make plans.

That summer, a little more than two years ago, D'Arrigo founded A Reason to Survive, or ARTS, a nonprofit arts program, in memory of his mother. His close friends became board members and his former boss became the chairman.

"I think my mom would have been proud," said D'Arrigo, 31. He was at San Diego Children's Hospital, leaning into one of the few grown-up sized chairs in the hematology/oncology playroom. Years earlier, he feared the scent of hospital corridors would be too familiar, the memories of doctors and nurses too raw.

He came back for the children, he said. This July afternoon, they were coming to color.

They usually arrive four or five at a time, depending on who feels up to leaving bed. They are often children with hard-to-pronounce cancers, some curable, some not. A few bring their IV poles.

D'Arrigo and his 18 volunteers spend three weekdays at the children's hospital and every Saturday at the Ronald McDonald House, where children undergoing treatment and their families can stay. The volunteers paint and make crafts with children and teens with terminal or chronic illness, or those going through rehabilitation for injuries, such as head trauma or spinal cord damage.

D'Arrigo calls his hours here "expression sessions." It is the process, not the final product, he cares about. He and his volunteers don't analyze the artwork.

"A lot of times it's hard for children to express themselves," he said. "Art is an easy

way for them to express themselves without even knowing it. But we don't psychoanalyze the artwork. We're not trying to use the art to diagnose.

"We focus on letting them be kids."

D'Arrigo's green station wagon ferries art supplies to the hospital every week. The grassroots program, funded by grants and private donations, often relies on the generosity of art-supply store owners. This year, as ARTS began to apply for more competitive grants, D'Arrigo brought his program to hundreds of children whose parents were serving in Iraq.

But the hospital program was his first promise.

"Art takes you away from sickness, even if it is just for 20 minutes," D'Arrigo said from his chair in the playroom. "The kids aren't thinking about medication. They're doing art."

On this afternoon, D'Arrigo said he was looking forward to a bedside art session with a 17-year-old leukemia patient, Lourdes Estrada, whose beach scenes began a buzz of admiration among the nurses. D'Arrigo and Lourdes had been working together for six months, during her weekly and monthly stays.

"The other day Lourdes asked how I knew I wanted to be an artist," D'Arrigo said. "I told her that a lot of it can be taught in school, but a lot of it is inside."

D'Arrigo smiled as he recalled the conversation.

"With Lourdes, it's really a friendship."

Two days later, July 4, Lourdes died. D'Arrigo was at the hospital. He had come to paint with her. He comforted her family instead.

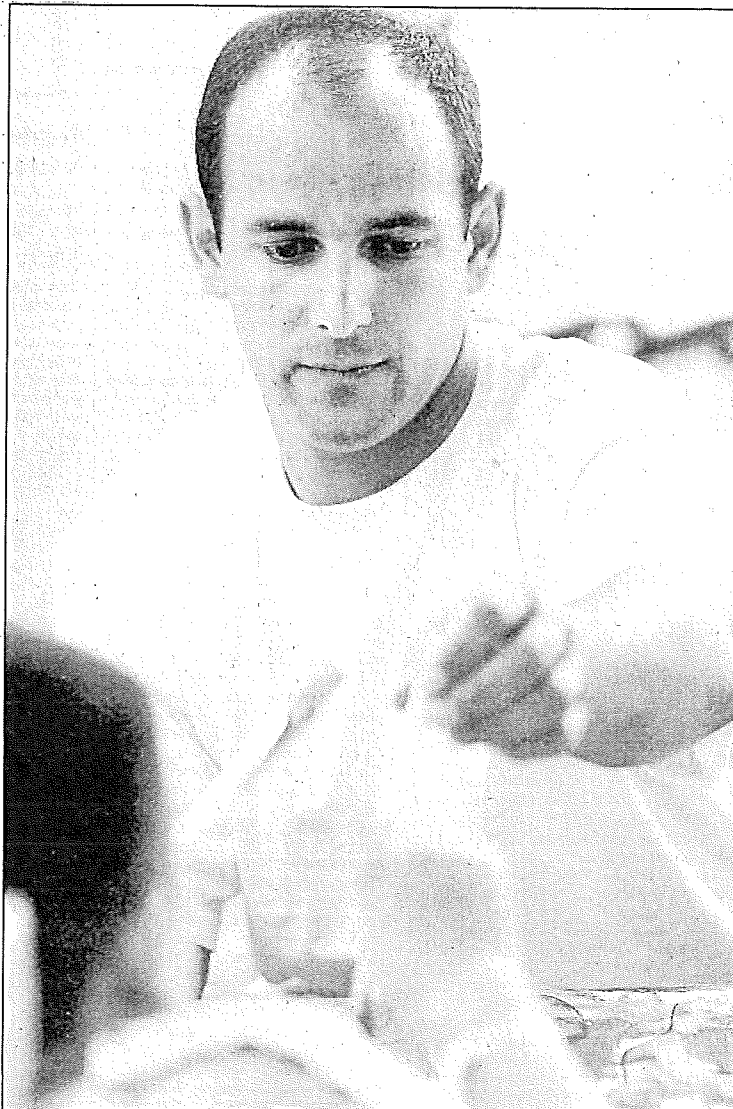
"Lourdes was the first time someone reminded me of my mother," D'Arrigo said a few days later. "She was really deep. It made me think of my mom and the last months of her life."

She opened up, he said. If she was scared or confused, they would talk. But mostly, he helped her paint the places where she would rather be.

D'Arrigo's theory is simple: Let the children find comfort in creating.

"I feel better when I work with Matt," said Gina Ojeda, 15.

Gina has been undergoing chemotherapy since March. In June, a malignant tumor was



Matt D'Arrigo, founder of the ARTS program, worked on a painting with a patient at San Diego Children's Hospital. D'Arrigo's mother died of cancer in 1992. K.C. Alfred / Union-Tribune

removed from her left leg, so she scoots around the playroom with a walker.

It's too hot today, she said, sliding off a layered, black wig.

"Matt tells me to do art that will make me happy, to make me glad about the person I am," she said. "He always smiles. He's always happy."

A few chairs away, 4-year-old Brienne Firkins reached for her choice pastels.

"I like pink. I like every color, but not white," Brienne said.

Brienne's hair is growing back into a blond pixie style after 14 months of radiation and chemotherapy. She was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor almost two years ago. D'Arrigo and 21-year-old volunteer Nicole Hawthorne helped her blend colors.

"I learn a lot from the kids," said Hawthorne, a senior at the

University of Colorado, Boulder. "They may have IV poles, but they're still kids. They make the best of it."

Most of D'Arrigo's volunteers are in their early 20s and pursuing careers in art therapy. They found ARTS on Volunteermatch.org or heard about it from others. Hawthorne hopes to find a job in child health care after she graduates next year.

On a purple couch in the

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children's hospital playroom, a father waited for answers. Bill Firkins would know Brienne's latest test results in the next few hours.

"We're crossing our fingers for continued shrinkage of the tumor," Firkins said, his words echoing months of doctor talk.

He watched his daughter from across the room. She was too busy drawing a picture of him to notice.

D'Arrigo said he doesn't try to absorb the stress of his days: alone. He, often goes to the nurses.

"Is it normal to feel like this?" he asks after a particularly emotional session. Yes, they tell him. You're doing fine.

Since the program began, ARTS has lost three patients. More than 1,000 ill children have worked with D'Arrigo and his volunteers.

"When I go to these funerals and I see all the artwork up around the casket, that tells me that ARTS is accomplishing its mission," D'Arrigo said. "The arts were an important part of the child's life, part of who they were. The families have something to hold on to and keep."

In Heather Sowell's home, her son's artwork is framed on the walls. The scribble one is her favorite.

Riley Sowell was 3 when he died of liver cancer in December. D'Arrigo worked with him almost two years and gave the eulogy at Riley's funeral. The Sowell family talks to D'Arrigo at least once a month.

"The kids need the art," Heather Sowell said. "They need to know they can just be free. It let them go to a different place. Even if it's just for a little while, they can go wherever they want."

Jenny Diamond is a Union-Tribune intern.