

Artist donates talents to help heal

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VADNAIS HEIGHTS — Karolyn Stirewalt hopes her traveling mural helps build excitement for renovations at Gillette Children's Hospital and provides comfort to patients and visitors.

An attorney for the Minnesota Medical Association, the Vadnais Heights resident is also now sharing her artistic talents.

An art hobbyist since childhood, Stirewalt established Splash of Red Studio in Vadnais this spring. In addition to filling private paid commissions in a variety of mediums, she provides free art for area hospitals and clinics.

The most notable of her projects is a 16-by-7-foot mural at Gillette Children's Hospital in St. Paul. As the hospital undergoes several years of expansion and renovations, the mural moves throughout the hospital providing a colorful blockade of construction areas.

Stirewalt estimates she spent more than 400 hours designing and painting the mural. Her work features hospital patients, staff and volunteers on a path from the old hospital building to the expanded building. They're surrounded by St. Paul landmarks and some of Gillette's corporate sponsors.

Some of the fictitious patients are portrayed with disabilities. The other characters are modeled from photographs of actual Gillette doctors, administrators, volunteers and even therapy dogs.

"I hope the patients can really identify with it," Stirewalt said. "I hope they see it and say 'I recognize that doctor' or 'that child is just like me.'"

Stirewalt also painted a similar image for the cover of Gillette's 2009 annual report.

This summer she also painted two tables for the hospital's new coffee shop. The busy tabletop collages invite users to search for hidden objects.

Now Stirewalt is designing and painting 10 ceiling tiles for the Women's Clinic at Boynton Health Services at the University of Minnesota.

Stirewalt said research showing art can have a positive impact on patient outcomes inspired her to bring her own art to health care facilities. She's a member of the Society for the Arts in Health Care and the Midwest Arts in Health Care Network. "Studies continue to show that patients who feel comfortable and engaged in their surroundings heal faster," Stirewalt said. "I work with medical facilities, patients and the public to create customized artwork that sets a tone of encouragement and well-being."

She said art is her creative outlet.

"It provides a balance to the linear thinking my legal career requires," she said.

As an attorney for the Minnesota Medical Association for the last five years, she monitors and provides input on legislative bills and oversees the filing of friend of the Court briefs in court cases that will broadly impact physicians across the state. She also serves on the association's Ethics and Medical-Legal Affairs Committee.

She said her art ambitions include additional art projects at more health care facilities and opening an art studio with gallery and classroom space.

Her Splash of Red Studio gets its name because she uses at least a speck of her favorite color in every work. She described her work as colorful and eclectic. In addition to murals and fine art, she paints old furniture. She also dabbles in photography and stained glass.



Karolyn Stirewalt stands next to her favorite work: The piano she painted with scenes from favorite family memories. Stirewalt also created the artwork on top of the piano. - Photo by Kristine Goodrich