

I work at a hospital. I am on my feet all day. I interact with patients, staff, and caregivers, and I make them feel better. But I am not a doctor. I'm not a nurse. I didn't go to medical school.

My job is to make dances.

I am a Movement Artist in Residence at the Georgetown Lombardi Arts and Humanities Program at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital in Washington D.C. What exactly does that mean?

As an artist in residence, it's my job to see the hospital as more than the sum of its parts. I use movement to foster a culture of community building and creativity as part of the hospital experience. Me, and my three fellow movement artists, lead dance encounters for patients, caregivers, and staff on site. **We use dance to transform a space sterile and void of personality to one pulsing with possibility.**

Every October, we have our Day of Dance at Georgetown. On this annual day, a small cast of dancers weaves its way through hospital waiting areas, hallways, lobbies, and units. We are a movement choir.

For the past 3 years, I've been the director of the Day of Dance. Today I'd like to tell you what it is like.

Our dance begins in the atrium of the hospital's cancer wing. Our resident musician, Anthony starts the event by playing his violin, and the dancers enter one at a time – each striking a shape like a statue.

In the middle of the atrium, a middle-aged gentleman, previous slouched in his seat in the lobby, perks up to see what is happening. As the music swells, the dancers move in unison -- incorporating gestures that represent the breadth of circumstance of a hospital visit woven in with graceful and lively sequences. Anthony's soft violin sounds are drifting up to the offices on the second floor.

A group of medical students is caught by surprise as they encounter us on their usual route through the atrium.

After the opening sequence, the dancers move like *m o l a s s e s* in a single file processional down the main artery of the hospital, hugging the wall to one side and using only our arms to dance on the other. We smile and say hello to the bewildered administrators, janitorial staff, and visitors as we slowly amble past.

We pause and gesture to let an elderly woman pass while pushing a companion in a wheelchair down the narrow hallway. A line of people has started to build behind us, mimicking our movements with curiosity and delight. They look like they have surprised themselves.

One of the followers, way back in the line, is Dr. Nick. He's an orthopedic resident who has been excused by his supervisor to represent the Orthopedics Department in our dance today. Dr. Nick has no formal dance experience. **But today, dance isn't about training or performance or perfection. Today, dance is just about saying yes.**

The dancers exit out the hospital's main doors, and engage in a series of solo dances on the patio – a high foot traffic area. Dr. Nick is fully invested now. His inhibitions are starting to fade with the contagious effect of our dance and music. He dances as one of the movement choir, even as visitors and staff pass by, and pause to watch us.

We head back inside up the stairs to the chemotherapy unit. The nursing staff know we are on the way and have given us enthusiastic permission to enter. They have given the patients the opportunity to open the curtains to their infusion rooms and witness the dance – **or to take hold of a rare moment of agency *in their treatment* by closing their curtains and opting out of our passing dance.** We share short, intimate dances with the patients – the ones who are awake anyway.

Leading up to the Day of Dance, we had published map of our route and stopping points, distributed to the whole hospital network. So as we enter a sprawling intersection where the hospitals' 4 main buildings intersect, nurses in the neighboring units hear us approach and step out to witness our choir. Some jump in and join us, enthusiastically without abandon, surprising their colleagues. Others watch skeptically, unsure how to react to the dancers in the bright shirts and their violinist overtaking the usually bland, lifeless fluorescent hallway.

I spot a stretcher coming down the hallway. I gesture our sign for "pause" and we immediately glue ourselves to the walls to make space for the people coming through. We offer the transport team and half-conscious patient some encouraging gestures as they pass.

We scatter throughout a waiting area where people are waiting for their loved ones to be out of surgery. We look them in the eye, we take in their sorrow, their fatigue, their fear – and we dance for them.

We gather on the pediatric floor and perform for an audience of young patients who have gathered in the playroom to watch us. They clap, sing, and dance along.

As we exit, a mom stops a dancer and to thank her for a moment of grace in an otherwise endless year in pediatrics with her son. In her eyes there is a look of conflicted joy – relief for a moment of indulgence in beauty while her child was in pain.

When we encounter a security guard, a friendly face I've come to know over my five years, he smiles broadly and encourages visitors to clear the way for our parade.

A moment later, the resident robot rolls past us, its mechanical beeps and pivots now a proud solo amongst our chorus. Such a diva.

Our dance has made its way back to the atrium which is packed with staff waiting for us – on their lunch break -- along with some unsuspecting visitors. We make our entrance and then invite our audience to join us in dance. Most do, while others

have made their way to the edges to watch – but they stay, captivated. My fellow resident artists lead everyone through a stretch, some breath, and we shake it out together in a grand finale.

**In that moment, it doesn't matter why we are inside that hospital. It doesn't matter if you're a head surgeon, a kitchen hand, a secretary, a visiting outpatient, or a caregiver. What matters in that moment is that we are alive, and we are together.**

--

You might be thinking, doesn't this get in the way? The answer is yes. And, that's kind of the point.

Every element of this event – the collaborators, the choreography, the route, the timing – is meticulously designed to disrupt just enough. With an innate understanding of the hospital's corners and crevices, ebbs and flows, we were able to build something equally playful and practical, with safety always first. **We didn't just dance in the hospital – we danced WITH the hospital.**

--

Our Day of Dance challenges the idea of what a healthcare space could be. Even for just a moment, we create a culture that invites people to say that “yes” to more personal. When we make people look up, take a breath, and participate in a moment of beauty we jangle the stagnant air. **We shift the vibrations of the physical space and change how it is experienced.**

Once we've interrupted the norm we can begin to reimagine our healthcare spaces.

**Could a hospital not only promote science and innovation in medicine to heal and save lives, but also foster creativity and community-building as part of that?**

The impact of our dance reverberates throughout MedStar Georgetown University Hospital. Year around we hear from staff and returning patients about a resonant delight of encountering us that day. A staff one longtime staff member described it to be “like a prayer.” A patient said, “it made me grateful that I had to come in for treatment that day.”

Dr. Nick, who began his journey with us a little shy and uncertain, left us with bright eyes, and a transformed perspective. He saw the hospital in a new light that day, too.

--

By inviting participants to tap into their self-expression we empower their humanity. When that experience is facilitated with mutual respect and understanding within the realities of a living, breathing hospital, that hospital serves in a whole new way. It becomes a place that, beyond the poking and the prodding, celebrates possibility and reminds everyone what they want to stay healthy for.

When we allow ourselves to swim in these ideas then we can ask, why just one day a year? Why just one dance? At the Arts & Humanities Program when we make space for dance we also make space for:

- Weekly stretch breaks with staff
- Yoga in the hallways
- Adaptive dance classes for patients
- Arts integration as medical student curriculum

Before long, a cultural shift emerges, along with the space for thoughtful, bountiful innovation between artists, medical thought leaders, and interdisciplinary experts as the healthcare system evolves to meet the demands and circumstances of our time.

When this happens we all have more of a say in how we experience the healthcare system– no matter how, when, or why we encounter it.

That agency, above all, is a priceless gift of empowerment, access, and compassion.

And that is why we should be dancing with our doctors.

DO NOT DISTRIBUTE