



Artist-in-Residence Julie Adamson Miller by her *Tree of Life Mural* Project at the Camp Hill Veteran's Memorial Building

## Art as Good Medicine

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For the past five months, Artist-in-Residence Julie Adamson Miller has been engaging the hearts and minds of Dalhousie University medical students.

Her work is part of the Medical Humanities Program, which uses the arts and humanities to inspire multi-layered understandings of the experiences of illness and health.

At the height of end-of-term stress and exam anxiety in December, Miller installed her *Anti Depression Chamber (Happiness Shelter)* in the foyer of the Sir Charles Tupper Medical Building.

Any student passing through the lobby to classes, labs or the Kellogg Library had a chance to de-stress by entering this large, curved, tubular, tent-like chamber featuring white luminescent nylon walls with bold, brightly painted floral patterns by Barry Roode of Mushaboom Design.

Miller explores the issues of anxiety and depression from a positive, healing perspective providing, in her words, a “mood altering space where one has a opportunity to engage the senses and experience physical pleasure” for psychological relief and perspective taking.

The art installation also acted as a forum for the exchange of ideas and experiences on depression.

Over 150 medical students responded to Miller’s question: “What is your antidote to depression?” by posting ideas on sticky notes to the display stand beside the *Anti Depression Chamber*.

Students’ anti depression strategies ranged from reading, dancing, listening to music and walking in the park to humming, baking cookies, eating chocolates, and drinking some wine.

A recent installation in Dalhousie’s Tupper Medical Building was another Miller art installation called *The X-ray Shelter*.

It consisted of human x-rays stitched together to form the skin that covers a small greenhouse frame structure which one can walk inside. Once inside, viewers can readily see the tissue and bone of the arms, legs, pelvis and abdomen of the various patients who donated their x-rays for this shelter. Yet their individual stories remain a mystery.

In Miller’s view, “the x-rays lit from the outside mimic the appearance of stained glass and bring to mind that the body is a temple which under the right conditions can mend and heal.”

That was, in fact, how various medical students responded to the art installation.

One first year med student stated that the *X-ray Shelter*, “felt like a spiritual space, a calm, meditative space on the body. The body really is our temple, our home, and yet we often take our bodies and health for granted.

“I liked the subtle message of the *X-ray Shelter* – it really is a good thing to take a few moments to reflect on our bodies in this way.”

The scope of Miller’s art work on health and wellbeing extended beyond Dal’s medical community to projects for local hospital patients.

Her *Tree of Life Mural Project* at the Camp Hill Veteran’s Memorial Building saw day-patients painting wooden bird silhouettes created by Miller. The painted birds were placed on a mural of trees she commissioned from Lynda McConnell. The *Tree of Life Mural* adds a pleasing, nature-inspired, artful space to the hospital’s ground floor recreation room.

An elderly participant who finished a robin for the project remarked, “This made my day. I didn’t even know I could paint before doing this. What fun!”

“Having artists-in-residence, like Julie Adamson Miller, serves to deepen the dimensions of meaning around health in wonderful ways for us in the field of medical education and healthcare, ” says, Dr. Gerri Frager, Director of Dalhousie’s Medical Humanities HEALS Program, where HEALS stands for Healing and Education through Arts and Life Skills.

“This has been a hugely successful celebration of the intersection of arts and health for patients, students, faculty and staff,” says Frager.

When not launching art projects at Dal, Miller works out of her studio on Old Taylor’s Head Road on Nova Scotia’s Eastern Shore where she is inspired by “amazing coastal views and a wonderful community of people, including many artists.”

A grant from the Robert Pope Foundation funded this artist-in-residence program.



Miller’s art installation called *The X-ray Shelter* at Dalhousie Medical School.