

M. D. ANDERSON CANCER CENTER Children's Art Project™

by Gail Goodwin

The Children's Art Project at The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center ...still growing, still giving, and still all fired up!

Balls bouncing. Kids laughing. Kids drawing. Kids studying. Videos playing. Kids cooking. Kids having fun. This is the ninth floor of M. D. Anderson's Albert B. and Margaret M. Alkek Hospital and it's a happening place. But on the child and adolescent floor, these children are also battling cancer.

These children, however, are still simply kids who have had their childhood interrupted by a life-threatening disease. Like any child, they like to play and have fun, but it is a lot harder to do the things that most kids do

when they are dealing with cancer. That's where M. D. Anderson's Children's Art Project steps in. The art project works to help add an element of normalcy to these young lives.

At The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, the Children's Art Project is a virtual Santa Claus, funding many programs that make life better for children living with cancer. The office of the art project is one of those places where it's Christmas all year long. Summer camps, college scholarships, ski trips, in-hospital classrooms, child life workers, exciting activities for young cancer patients—the Children's Art Project funds them all, treating the whole patient as well as the whole family. The process from a child's simple drawing to the marketable product sold by the Children's Art Project is a long journey. It all begins with the very art classes where the artwork is

created—classes funded by proceeds from the project itself.

That was then...

It began with a volunteer's wonderful idea—art deemed pretty enough to be put on a holiday greeting card. This idea was presented to the dynamic Director of Volunteer Services, Paige Lawson, and the program took off from there. The Children's Christmas Card Project, now called the Children's Art Project, was born from that inspiration in 1973 at The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center.

Art has always been a diversion for pediatric patients at M. D. Anderson, but in the early 1970s, that diversion became serious business. The Department of Volunteer Services began looking at the artwork produced by these young patients in a whole different light.

What if, they wondered, they could use some of these creations to make Christmas cards? And, what if they could sell these cards and raise money to fund special programs for the children?

Turns out that they could and they did. Over thirty years later, this little idea



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has grown into a full-fledged business that each year funds patient-focused programs at M. D. Anderson, most of them benefiting pediatric patients.

The volunteers from back in 1973 would be amazed to discover that the idea has grown into a more than \$6 million, year-round business. Over the years, the art project has allocated more than \$18.5 million to fund patient programs at M. D. Anderson. It helps keep up the spirits of pediatric patients as they undergo treatment, by providing a comprehensive psychosocial program. With funding from the project, M. D. Anderson is better able to offer programs that address the educational, recreational, and emotional aspects of treatment. They treat the whole child, not just the disease. Many of the children participating in the art project have grown up and gone on to lead healthy, active lives. Diagnosed with cancer at an early age, they have fought their battle and won.

What came in between ...

For its first 26 years, the Children's Christmas Card Project (CCCP) operated under the umbrella of the Department of Volunteer Services at M. D. Anderson. However, in November 1999, the project became its own department under the Office of Public Affairs with its own executive director.

Twenty-seven full-time workers staff the project, but volunteers remain central to making this project so successful. This was certainly true in the early years.

During the first holiday season, volunteers used hospital gurneys as work tables, hand-packaging Christmas cards with brown paper and string for sale to M. D. Anderson employees. From the beginning, these helpers had their hands in almost every element of the project, and were proud to sell 9,000 cards that first holiday season. They sold three different card designs in 1974. Although these simple cards used minimal color, they sold out within a week, returning \$588 in profit to M. D. Anderson programs.

The project captured the imagination of everyone who learned about it, and sales quickly expanded beyond the institution walls. In fact, in 1976, President and Mrs. Gerald Ford's Christmas card came from CCCP. Support from other national figures such as President and Mrs. George H. W. Bush, Lady Bird Johnson, Houston Oiler Earl Campbell, dancer/choreographer Tommy Tune, baseball great Nolan Ryan, author Erma Bombeck, and actress Sissy Spacek continued to increase the visibility of the project in Houston, throughout Texas, and around the country.

Along with its young artists, CCCP grew up, responding to ever-changing business trends. In 1977, the project funded an art teacher to direct the pediatric art program at M. D. Anderson. Under professional tutelage, the project's range of art mediums expanded. From simple crayon drawings, the children began to use watercolors, colored markers, tissue paper collages, and more. Hanukkah cards were added to the collection for the first time in 1978 and holiday ornaments were introduced as the first gift item a decade later.

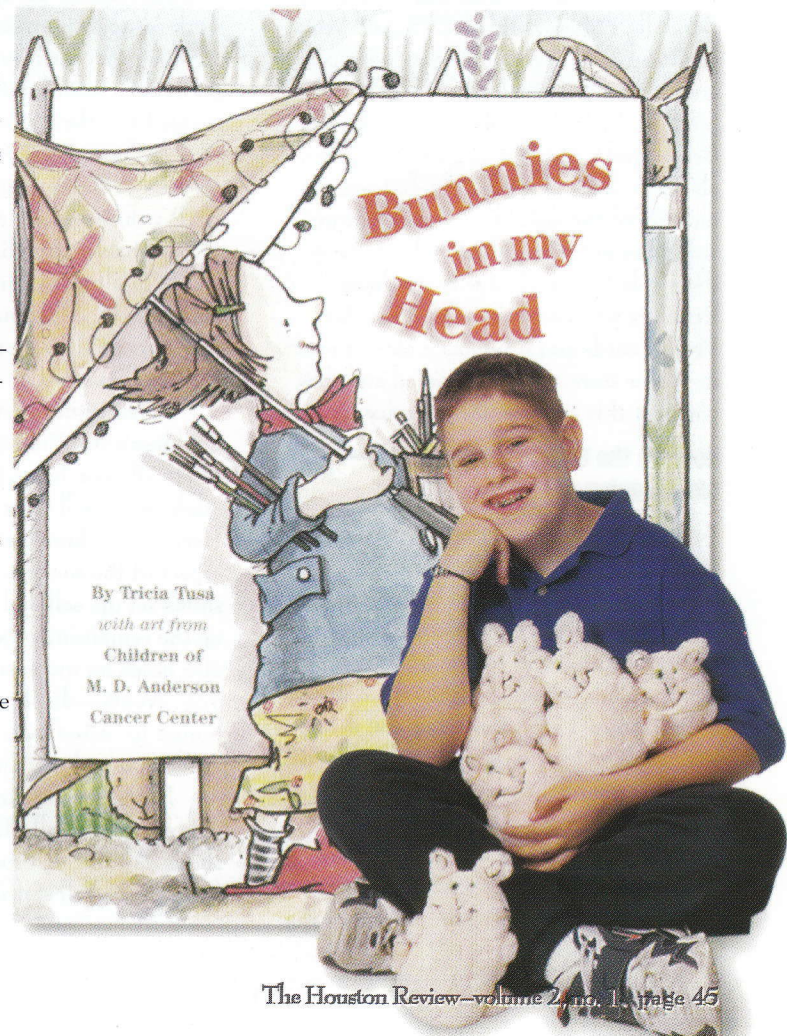
With its growing product line, the maturation of the business side of the

project began. The first holiday brochure was printed in 1979. It was a far cry from the 36-page catalog now printed each year for the holidays, but it was a great start. CCCP graduated to mass marketing in 1980 when it produced its first television public service announcement, featuring Lady Bird Johnson.

A logo for the project, then still called the Children's Christmas Card Project, first appeared in 1981, but the appearance of computers in the office in 1983 really sent the project in a whole new direction. The donation by Arthur Andersen of five computers, staff training to use them, and a 1-800 phone number added for customer orders, brought CCCP into the twentieth century.

The project has always benefited from community support. In past years, the Sakowitz department stores donated space in four stores to sell cards, the Glassell School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, provided art volunteers, and Ninfia's restaurant provided refreshments for kick-off parties.

Cards were sold in area banks with First Interstate Bank being the first to sell



cards in all bank branches. Texas Commerce Bank (Chase Bank in 1998) was first to send mini brochures in bank statements. Corporations licensed designs for corporate use—beginning with Scott Paper producing napkins and placemats. Pizza Hut sold cards in its restaurants and printed card coupons on boxes. Today, print partners, corporate shippers, retailers, and other community friends continue to support the Children's Art Project.

One of the most significant influences on the growth of the project, however, was the offer of donated floor space for holiday product sales by Randalls grocery stores in 1986. With the success of this program, CCCP applied to the University Cancer Foundation in 1990 for a \$400,000 loan to hire a marketing consultant to help build the project's presence in the grocery industry.

Today, cards and gift items are sold in more than 2,500 retail outlets in Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Florida and a few locations in Colorado, Kansas, and New Mexico. Grocery stores, including Albertson's, Fiesta, HEB Grocery Company, Kroger, Publix Supermarkets, Randalls, Safeway, Texas CVS, and Vons chains, display fixtures stocked with cards and other paper products. Other types of retailers, including Foley's, Palais Royal, Bealls, and a number of area car washes, also have these fixtures. The fixtures are monitored through the Adopt-A-Store volunteer program, which helps to keep them tidy and stocked with products. Retailers who carry the Children's Art Project cards and products make no profit. Their store space is donated and they consider this a community service.

Now it's the Children's Art Project— what's going on...

As the project grew, it naturally expanded into a year round program. In 1991, CCCP unveiled "Spring Things," the first everyday greetings collection. Art from pediatric patients at M. D. Anderson Orlando was introduced into the holiday collection in 1993 and retail and direct mail sales in Florida were launched. With the addition of the spring line, a new name was in order. The Children's Art Project (CAP), along with a brand new logo, was unveiled in 1995 in order to better reflect the year round nature of the

project. The first Valentine collection followed in 1996.

Keeping up with business trends, in 1997 CAP launched its Web site, www.childrensart.org, and established an online store. By 1998, the business generated a record \$1 million in proceeds for allocation to M. D. Anderson patient programs. The same year, CAP published its first-ever children's book called *Bunnies in my Head*. Written and illustrated by award-winning author Tricia Tusa, the book features an afterward by Barbara Bush and was marketed as a special CAP 25th anniversary keepsake.

Though CAP staff members have increased from three in 1985 to the twenty-seven on staff today, volunteers are still the heart, soul, and backbone of the CAP work force. They are involved in every aspect of the project—from taking product orders, shipping packages, assisting with accounting, and taking inventory, to curling ribbons for special giveaway card packages. Some work almost full-time and have their own desks, offices, and telephone lines. This core group of volunteers is supplemented by corporate and community groups who come in to work on special projects during holidays. Across the country, volunteers deliver products to retail outlets, sell products at no profit at their stores, and promote the project through the media and word-of-mouth—all adding up to the fact that CAP volunteers are responsible for 90% of the work accomplished by the project. In 2003 alone, volunteers donated almost 505,794 hours to the project—the equivalent of more than 240 full-time employees.

In addition to retail outlets, the Children's Art Project attends off-site shows all over Texas, Louisiana, and Alabama to sell their cards and gifts. Here, too, volunteers are an important aspect of the success. Those who work the shows set up, sell and take down, and pack up the remaining products. The project also holds an increasing number of "Table Top" events—displays and sales in private homes to introduce a community to M. D. Anderson and the Children's Art Project.

In the project's own backyard, products are sold in all M. D. Anderson gift shops and through special employee task force sales—all staffed by volunteers.

Consignees such as church groups, banks, gift shops, and individuals also take an assortment of inventory to sell and return all monies to the project.

The Children's Art Project opened its first full retail establishment in the fall of 2000. In space generously donated by Uptown Park Shopping Center, the art project sells its full line of products and inventory. The store, called the Children's Art Project Boutique, opens its doors from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

From a community/professional/staff task force established in 1998, a strategic plan was developed for the art project. It was obvious to all involved that while CAP was holding on to its big heart, it had also become big business. Today, the Children's Art Project is known around the world as one of the oldest, largest, and most loved charitable card projects.

The spirit of giving has been the success of the Children's Art Project. As CAP has grown, so has the progress in treating pediatric cancer. Today some 70% of children with cancer will survive. That makes CAP's mission of providing emotional, educational, and social support even more important as these children grow up to lead productive adult lives.

Today, through worldwide sales of young cancer patients' original artwork featured on seasonal note cards and gift items, the project has funded millions of dollars of programs that benefit cancer patients and their families.

The Children's Art Project is still growing, still giving, and still all fired up. It is a celebration of volunteers, individuals, community partners, and corporations working together to make life better for children fighting cancer. ■

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