



Medicine for the Soul

by Tom Berg

A bubbly little girl – that’s what she was before the night sweats started.

By age 5, Ava Valdez was a ballerina, a Girl Scout and everyone’s friend in kindergarten. So Mom knew something was wrong when Ava complained of fatigue at age 6, and when she awoke crying with a fever that lasted days.

The Diagnosis

“It might be a virus,” they all hoped. But it was more than that. Ava had acute lymphoblastic leukemia, a childhood cancer of the blood and bone marrow. “You don’t think it’s ever going to happen to your child,” said Andreae Valdez of Redondo Beach. “But it did. Our hearts were breaking.”

In October 2013, Andreae took Ava to Miller Children’s & Women’s Hospital Long Beach for her first round of chemotherapy. That’s when they discovered a program unlike any other – one with medicine for the soul. “I’m so grateful,” Andreae said. “It changed my daughter’s life.”

More Than Just Playtime

Ava joined an art therapy program led by art therapist Carrie Cottone, who works with children in the playroom, the infusion center, the lobby and at their bedsides. She’s part of a unique team of doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers and child life specialists who treat children with modern medicine – and a human touch. “Cancer takes away a lot of choices for our patients,” Carrie said. “Art gives them back some control.” Creating art helps patients feel better emotionally, psychologically and, at times, physically. It can also distract them from pain and/or nausea, reduce stress and lower anxiety.

Ava’s mom saw its value whenever Ava and Carrie painted together, especially in Ava’s room after stressful chemotherapy treatments. “If Ava was on the vital signs monitor,” Andreae said, “I’d see her blood pressure drop when Carrie came in!”

Carrie is involved in hundreds of art therapy sessions with pediatric hematology/oncology patients each year. She provides everything from crayons to sculpting clay to iPads, which teenagers seem to prefer. It’s more than simple arts and crafts. “It provides a creative outlet for the patient,” she said. “And it also gives the treatment team another way to look into the patient.” It’s like an x-ray of their feelings.

At times, artwork shows that a child feels isolated or lonely or scared. “They don’t always have the words to express those emotions,” Carrie said. In those cases, Carrie shares the artwork with the psychosocial team. They can address it with the child’s parents to alleviate the child’s concerns. “No matter what, creating art creates a distraction, and it’s a nonverbal way for the patients to express themselves,” Carrie said.

Sometimes, it’s the highlight of their hospital stay, which explains why Ava made a curious detour on her way home recently. It came after 10 months

of highs and lows fighting leukemia. The low point came early on when, due to a genetic flaw, Ava was diagnosed as very high risk. That meant more prodding by doctors, more poking with needles and more chemotherapy infusions that made her feel sick. Throughout, she looked forward to one thing: art therapy with Carrie. “It was her safe haven,” Andreae said. “There was no medicine. No doctors. It was her way to de-stress.” The high point came in February – on Valentine’s Day – when test results showed no signs of leukemic cells in Ava’s bone marrow. “There was nothing,” Andreae said. “It was actually zero. I was so excited, I was crying. It was the best Valentine’s Day gift ever.”

Ava is now in remission yet still receives maintenance treatments. After one recent treatment, she stopped in the hall. She didn’t want to go home yet. “I like art,” she told her mom. “And I like Carrie because she’s nice and makes me feel happy and awesome.” With that, they returned to the playroom – to paint with Carrie.

“It was the messiest, gooiest finger painting you’ve ever seen,” said Andreae, who saved the paintings as keepsakes. “She had such a good time.” It is a reminder of how powerful art therapy can be when a child is going through life-altering treatment.

It’s support from Philanthropic Friends that keeps it running. Traditional insurance doesn’t cover the cost of art therapy, so the hospital relies on the kindness of donors. “I’m forever grateful to the Bauer Foundation, the Sunair Children’s Foundation and CBeyondCancer for grants that allow us to support the art therapy program,” said James Normandin, president of Memorial Medical Center Foundation. “Their generosity is critical to the overall treatment of our patients.”

Andreae puts it this way: Before leukemia, little Ava was bubbly. And now she is again.