

Art That Lights Up, Sounds Off and Reacts

Enliven Children's Hospital

By LISA EISENHAUER, Associate editor

Catholic Health World (www.chausa.org/publications/catholic-health-world/current-issue)

Before visitors enter the main lobby at Our Lady of the Lake Children's Hospital, they pass under a glass and metal canopy where tinted panels transform sunlight into a dazzling array of colors. Speakers spread beneath the framework release the chirps and splashes of the Louisiana bayou. On the columns that support the 4,000-square-foot canopy are colorful handprints that, when touched, set off musical serenades with melodic flourishes of flutes, marimbas or acoustic guitar.

The artistic installation at the Baton Rouge, Louisiana, hospital is called Harmonic Grove. Dr. Shaun Kemmerly, chief medical officer, says the artwork sets the kid-friendly tone of the six-story hospital that opened in October.

"It draws you in," Kemmerly says. "It's an intuitive way to bring kids and families onto our campus and make it a less scary space. It's just kind of fun from the outset."

The playful tone is carried by other features at the hospital, including vivid paint schemes and animal mascots inside and park-like play areas with

benches and paths outside. The hospital is part of the Our Lady of the Lake Children's Health, a network within Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady Health System.

New art for new spaces

Harmonic Grove is one of at least three art installations at Catholic children's hospitals in the south that incorporate sound and light and, in two of them, interactive elements. Each of the hospitals are newly built or renovated.

Leaders at the hospital say the installation was to add color, amusement and a sense of place. For Baton Rouge, that place is the bayou. The speakers in the Harmonic Grove canopy are programmed to play sounds from the slow moving streams and marshes that crisscross Louisiana and are home to an abundance of wildlife and vegetation. Its glass panels are largely in the same blue and green color scheme picked up inside the hospital and meant to reflect the shades of the Mississippi delta.

Artist Christopher Janney designed Harmonic Grove. He said he was commissioned after someone connected to Our Lady of the Lake saw his Soundstair installation at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis. That piece uses photo-electric sensors to emit melodic and natural sounds in time with the steps of people as they ascend or descend a staircase. Janney installed a similar piece at Boston Children's Hospital.

“I say that my work is good for children of all ages, 2-92,” Janney says. “I think it’s a great way to stimulate creative play. That’s a very good thing to have, I think, in a children’s hospital environment.”

Harmonic Grove includes a “riddle” that’s on a small plaque. When someone deciphers the riddle and touches the handprints in the pillars in a certain order, the piece answers with a short “dance” of flashing colors and sound.

Ever-changing attraction

Kemmerly, of Our Lady of the Lake, says the new children’s hospital is a big hit with patients and staff. She says people tell her: “I’m so happy here.” She says part of the hospital’s popularity is due to its colorful and playful features like Harmonic Grove, which casts an ever-changing splash of colors from the entryway into the lobby.

“If you come into the hospital in the morning you may experience it one way and if you go out at a different time of day it’s a different experience,” Kemmerly says. “It’s just pretty remarkable.”