



NEWS

Astronaut artists in cancer wards: five minutes with . . . Nicole Stott

The retired NASA astronaut talks about the Space for Art Foundation, a project that provides space themed art therapy for children in cancer wards

Elisabeth Mahase

The BMJ

“It started with the space suit art project. I had the opportunity to work with an artist called Ian Cion, who started the Arts in Medicine programme at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

“Ian had always done work with kids, helping to incorporate their individual artwork into a bigger art piece that would be a community project, so that the kids could feel a part of something bigger—and he wanted to do something with space. We actually flew a couple of the finished space suits with the kids’ designs up to the International Space Station, and the kids got to see them there.

“The simplest way to describe the initiative is space themed art therapy, but that doesn’t do it justice. It’s much bigger. It’s about allowing these children and their families, who are going through what you hope is the worst thing they will have to deal with, to focus on something different, to transcend this experience they’re having. It’s like taking them to space—not just figuratively but literally, with their artwork going to space.

“We’ve gone from working in just one hospital to over 30 around the world, from New Zealand to Iran, Ecuador to Tonga. In the UK we have kids from Great Ormond Street Hospital participating. We’re also expanding to work with kids in refugee situations.

“I think that the children are inspired by the idea of an astronaut, but for me and the others who take part we may be getting even

more out of it, just witnessing their strength. They physically get stronger when they’re taking part: they often come in tired, their parents almost dragging them into the room, and they don’t want to be there—but you see this transformation as they paint and talk to you and to other patients in the hospital. So many times I’ve walked away from a session just in awe of what the children were thinking and doing.

“As astronauts, we always talk about this view of looking out of the window towards Earth and how stunning that is. But if you flip it around and look out towards blacker-than-black space, you get the same kind of feeling inside of you. And I think that it’s the same thing with these kids: it’s about putting this experience they’re going through behind them for a while and looking out into space and thinking about their future. It’s using the inspiration of space flight as a way to imagine themselves in a healthier place and hopefully give them some hope for the future.”

Nicole Stott was speaking to **Elisabeth Mahase** on Friday 7 June at the Risky Business conference in London, where she gave a speech on teamwork in remote settings.

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