Lessons from lupines
By Dana Cook Grossman

It’s the incongruity that gets me every time. There I am, rushing in from the upper parking lot to a meeting somewhere in the bowels of Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. I hustle through a narrow corridor and turn into a drab concrete stairwell. The fire door thuds shut behind me as I dash down the well-scuffed steps.

And then, as I turn the corner from the fifth floor to the fourth floor, I’m suddenly transported. I’m not in a concrete stairwell anymore, but in a field filled with lupines. Well, almost. On the landing between those two floors is a huge painting of purple lupines—one of many works of art placed throughout DHMC.

There are also inspiring works of art in the Medical Center’s stunning public architectural spaces. For example, a multistory mobile hangs in a vast open stairway in another part of the Medical Center. But I’m glad the DHMC Arts Program decided—as part of its Stairwell Art initiative, designed to encourage people to use stairs instead of elevators—that this out-of-the-way, undistinguished stairwell warranted an aesthetic touch. I think I’m almost more moved by the unexpected, bright splash of color in that plain concrete shaft than I am by the admittedly gorgeous mobile that graces the expansive public space. Sometimes, if there’s no one behind me in the stairwell and I’m not late for my meeting, I’ll actually stop in my tracks and gaze on those lupines for a few minutes.

I paused in that stairwell most recently, as it happens, when I was on my way to the cover photo shoot for this issue of the magazine. As my steps slowed, suddenly some lines from one of my favorite poems—“The Lake Isle of Innisfree” by William Butler Yeats—jumped into my mind.

The poem is a rumination on the pleasures of a remote lakeside cabin, on the peace and splendor of the natural world that surrounds it. It was the concluding lines of the poem that the lupines in the stairwell recalled for me:

I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavers gray,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.

It struck me that that concrete stairwell—not to mention the haste with which I’m usually dashing up or down it—are “pavements gray.” They’re facts of life, but they’re not what make life meaningful. And the painting of the lupines is “lake water lapping.” It’s a reminder—“in the deep heart’s core”—about the things that do matter: about the natural splendor within which we’re lucky enough to live and work here in the Upper Valley; about the truly meaningful endeavors of institutions like Dartmouth Medical School and Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center; and, above all, about the people who make those endeavors possible (the caregivers, the researchers, the teachers), as well as the people who benefit from them (the patients, present and future, and the students who are the caregivers and researchers of the future).

As I continued on my way to the photo shoot, at a somewhat more measured pace, I couldn’t help but reflect on all the people who are this magazine’s “lake water lapping.” For example, producing a single, seemingly simple photograph for our cover required the services of our talented photographer, of course. But also of a DHMC volunteer who was kind enough to don a hospital johnny and pose as our mock patient. And of several nurses and technicians who found us an empty patient room to use for the shoot and then helped us ensure that even though our “patient” wasn’t real, everything else in the image was as close to real as possible.

I felt gratitude anew for the fact that Dartmouth truly is a place where people go the extra mile. And where one finds lupines in concrete stairwells.

That mind-set is more important now than ever, as it happens, given the economic woes affecting everyone—from individuals to businesses, from our little office to the entirety of DMS and DHMC, from the region and the nation to the whole world. The breadth and depth of the financial downturn are an all-too-real “pavements gray.” But the “lake water lapping” is more than a line of poetry—it’s a reality, too. Tough times engender a can-do spirit; people rise to a challenge.

Without a doubt, DMS and DHMC will continue to serve those who need them. And I hope the lupines will continue to adorn that concrete stairwell, as a gloriously incongruous reminder that life certainly has its “pavements gray,” but it just as surely has its “lake water lapping.”