

Totally awesome

By Dana Cook Grossman

It was just like any other art show opening. There was a tray arrayed with neat rows of crackers and cheese squares; a platter of grapes and melon cubes next to a little container of colored toothpicks; a stack of clear plastic tumblers, ready to receive a suitable libation. There was a handout, listing the works of art on display and trumpeting the names of the featured artists. There was a horde of well-wishers partaking of the refreshments and perusing the paintings and drawings.

And, of course, there were the artists. They were beaming with pride at seeing their work on display in this public space, lining a major hallway at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. They sat or stood in little clusters with equally proud family members and friends. They posed next to their creations as camera flashes blinked up and down the hallway. They answered questions about what they were trying to achieve in works titled “The Rainbow,” “Kaleidoscope,” and “Awesome.”

Come to think of it, the artists' evident pride made the event not *just* like any other art show opening, but even better. For these artists, there was none of the affected nonchalance that is typical at such events. In fact, I'd say the whole occasion, not just one of the featured works, was *awesome*.

The works were the outcome of a program called the Incredible Creative Art Group, for “25 adults with various kinds of abilities.” At the opening, some of the 25 artists were using wheelchairs or walkers, while others had apparent (or not-so-apparent) developmental challenges. The program they took part in is one of many run by the AVA Gallery in Lebanon, N.H. (“AVA” stands for “Alliance for the Visual Arts,” though the gallery universally goes by its acronym; see page 12 for insight into another Dartmouth-AVA collaboration). And the exhibition of its participants' creations came about thanks to the DHMC Arts Program.

I always make a point of scanning the walls as I walk around DHMC because the Arts Program organizes regular exhibits featuring works in a variety of media by area artists. They're a great addition—I'd even say an *awesome* one—to the ambience of the institution, as well as to the sense of connectedness between this huge academic medical center and the far-flung communities it serves.

There are almost always opening receptions for

these exhibits, but I rarely get to them. I mean to, but when the appointed hour comes, all too often I don't feel I can spare the time.

But this particular opening got on my calendar early on, and I made a point of being there. That's because Marcy Sanborn, a volunteer services assistant for DHMC, had let me know that two of the featured artists—Tiffany Plamondon and Lauren Guay—have a special connection to DARTMOUTH MEDICINE, one that I hadn't known about until Marcy made me aware of it.

For many years, the Volunteer Services Office has been good enough to oversee the distribution of DARTMOUTH MEDICINE at DHMC. It turns out that for some time, Tiffany and Lauren have been the volunteers responsible—twice a week, every week—for placing hundreds of copies of the magazine on coffee tables throughout the main waiting areas of DHMC. Without their help, we'd be hard-pressed to keep up with the demand for copies in those well-trafficked places.

Tiffany and Lauren, Marcy told me, “are both ‘special needs’ volunteers, who have this chance to participate out in the community by volunteering at DHMC.” So the least I could do, I figured, in return for their showing up faithfully to deliver the magazine, was to show up at their art opening.

Tiffany was sitting near a mixed-media work titled “Desert at Sunset” that she'd created with Anna Rump, another participant in the program. And Lauren had several works in the show, including a watercolor still life; a bold pastel of tulips titled “Flowers”; and a collage in sunny yellows and bright blues. It's the latter work that was titled “Awesome,” for tucked amidst images of a lighthouse, seashells, a palm tree, and a sailboat was a strip of paper bearing the word “AWESOME.”

Yes, I know that the meaning of “awesome” has been devalued from casual overuse. But I have no hesitation applying the word to Tiffany and Lauren's art, to AVA for the program within which they created it, and to the DHMC Arts Program for featuring it. And, above all, to Tiffany and Lauren for their help getting DARTMOUTH MEDICINE into the hands of so many readers. I'm not prone to valley speak, but I'd even go so far as to say, “Tiffany and Lauren, you're *totally awesome*.” ■

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