

Rooms That Rock 4 Chemo

BY NANCY BALLARD



In May 2011, at the age of 60, I was happily retired, living the dream as a successful artist, author, wife, mother, and Nana. It was then I saw my first chemotherapy room “by mistake.” Simply by taking a right turn instead of a left turn, a nurse who admired my botanical art showed me a chemo room that needed some tender loving care. I wondered aloud how anyone could heal in a room that was so sad and drab; that lacked any interest, joy, or beauty. I knew just a single piece of art wasn’t going to make the difference, more significant re-design was needed. Contacting volunteer designers and local vendors and using a 100 percent volunteer work force, we “rocked” our first room.

This experience led to the creation of Rooms That Rock 4 Chemo, a non-profit organization that updates and beautifies spaces where cancer patients—and those who care for them—spend the many hours the treatment requires. Five years later, our rooms host more than 880,000 patient visits per year in 18 facilities in the U.S. and 2 in San Salvador.

My Calling

Rooms That Rock 4 Chemo (RTR4C) has been called an “accidental non-profit,” as I was not looking for a project—let alone a 24/7 volunteer job. I cannot exactly say why I was so moved in this direction or why I took it on so personally. Maybe it was a reaction to the blessing that I and my family are physically well. Maybe it was the artist in me that was literally shocked that an environment could look so hopeless.

I recognized a very real need to reach out

to those who are often marginalized because of cancer and who—because of their urgent health needs—must endure lengthy treatments. I saw firsthand that those receiving chemotherapy in hopes of saving their lives were often subjected to dismal, dark, and non-healing environments without thought or consideration for comfort, rest, and tranquility. Patients and family members sought to get through the grueling ordeal of cancer while in rooms that often did not support their human dignity or struggle. Ours is the first organization to acknowledge the very real problem of drab chemo room environments and work to find a solution.

My vision is that every patient receiving chemotherapy treatment is provided with a concrete sign of care and concern, bringing awareness to the fact that these patients and their families are so much more than just numbers in a complex healthcare system. We do this by providing lovely, hopeful, and soothing environments. And for the kids—fun!

It Takes a Village

Rooms That Rock 4 Chemo would not be possible without the passionate donation of talent, time, and money from thousands of volunteers, and local and national businesses that donate supplies and provide sponsorships. All of these volunteers and donors have responded with enthusiasm and gratitude for the opportunity to be involved.

Our “rocked rooms” have brought an increased awareness to healthcare providers and local community leaders, highlighting

the non-medical needs of this patient population. RTR4C has also brought gratitude and appreciation from those who have benefited from the healing and soothing effects, and has given the community volunteers a sense of accomplishment and a deeper appreciation of the plight of cancer patients. Our volunteers want to keep on giving, allowing RTR4C to make this a long-term and possibly world-wide project. As an added bonus, we are improving the daily lives of those who by profession serve this population, and we are challenging other communities to do likewise.

Rock with Us...A Patient Story

Three times. Three times diagnosed. Three times sitting in a chemotherapy chair hoping for the best. Hoping this third time would be the charm.

Fighting for her life in drab and uninspiring surroundings. This patient is in the twilight of her years and wants to give up. No one could blame her.

Friday afternoon: Her chemotherapy session is over. Finally. The kind-faced nurses say good-bye and wish her a good weekend. They promise to see her Monday bright and early. Everyone is tired. Yet another Monday looming in her future with the fear and difficulty of chemotherapy.

For the past six months we have planned and designed the transformation of these treatment rooms with a fabulous group of volunteers. Our team today numbers 90 volunteers—all there to make a difference in the lives of those receiving chemotherapy. We don’t all know each other but we all



agree, together we will make a difference. Our work must be completed in one short weekend; we don't have the luxury of time.

On Your Mark, Get Set, Go!

It is now Friday night. We stay until midnight, looking over the site, checking our inventory, paint, and supplies, and outdoor building space. Is food arranged for all volunteers? Check.

Do we have the new lighting supplies? Nope. (Put that on the list for Saturday and make a note to send someone out shopping). Make sure the wall art and volunteer T-shirts have arrived.

Saturday is a whirlwind of painting and stenciling.

It is now Sunday near midnight: Eight rooms are completed and restored. The wall art is hung. Decorator touches are in place. The environment is abuzz with hope and new beginnings.


Monday morning and our patient arrives for her appointment. She shuffles actually, shoulders sagging, head down. No hurry. She looks up to sign in at the front desk to find it, well, unrecognizable! The walls have been painted in soothing colors, beautiful artwork, murals, and stencils are placed perfectly between the new privacy curtains and the chemotherapy chairs. Even the waiting room is inviting and fresh.

She can feel the brilliance, the kindness coming out of each nook and cranny. She wonders who would do such a thing? How did this happen?

It is then she sees the ribbon cutting ceremony and hears the many "oh's and ah's" from staff and patients alike. She hears the story of RTR4C and its wonderful volunteers.

With tears streaming down her face, the patient sits in a new chemotherapy chair facing the party, taking it all in. Her eyes

twinkle; the room sparkles. Asked her opinion of the transformation, she almost jumps out of her chair with a spryness not seen lately by staff or fellow chemo buddies. She smiles wide and says, "Oh my, this is great. I'm gonna beat it. Yes, I'm gonna beat it this time. It is bea-u-ti-ful!"

Fingers crossed for the patient, and my team moves on to the next project! 

Artist Nancy Ballard founded Rooms That Rock 4 Chemo in 2011. Learn more about Nancy and RTR4C at: roomsthatrock4chemo.org.