

I wanted to bring art to people in need, and Montreal didn't need another art gallery

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When Earl Pinchuk and his husband Gary Blair visited a friend in the hospital, the first thing they noticed were the building's bland walls. A few years later, Earl left his job in his family's bedding business to start Art for Healing Foundation, an organization that places art in health-care settings across Canada.

This story is part of Living Generously, a Globe and Mail series, in partnership with Sun Life, focusing on Canadians who are giving back to their communities and making a difference in people's lives.



Gary Blair (left) and Earl Pinchuk (right) standing in front of Nycol Beaulieu's *Lakeside Mirror I* at Montreal's Hope & Cope Cancer Wellness Centre. Photo Credit: Nasuna Stuart-Ulin

"In the 1980s and 90s, I was working in a family business started by my grandfather. It was a comforter manufacturer that sold bedding products. When I was 38, I decided I wanted to do something different. One day, while I was walking in Old Montreal I had an epiphany. I stopped, turned to my husband Gary and said, 'I want to open an art gallery.' It was where I felt I belonged.

At around this time, our friend Yves was sick and staying at the Royal Victoria Hospital. When Gary and I visited him, we noticed a lack of art in his room or in the hallway. Yves didn't leave his room much, but I think if there was art on the walls, then we could have gotten him to walk around the corridors to see it.

Gary and I realized that Montreal didn't need another art gallery – it needed someone to bring art into health-care facilities. In 2002, we launched the Art for Healing Foundation, which coincided with my 40th birthday. So, of course, we threw a large party, but instead of gifts we asked people to open their wallets and donate to the foundation. About 100 people came and we raised \$10,000, which we used to buy 100 reproductions of paintings.

The first place we contacted was the Montreal Children's Hospital, because we felt children were the most in need of visual stimulation. To be an adult and to be sick is difficult, but when children are sick, it's just plain sad. If they have to be in a hospital, they should be in the nicest environment possible.

We first put up reproductions – of animals and anything else that would put a smile on a child's face – in the hematology department, where there were kids with leukemia and other blood disorders. Three days after they were installed we got a call saying the hospital was abuzz. I couldn't believe the reaction. People started calling and saying they had hundreds of original works of art to donate.

In 2006, I began to work full time as the executive director of the Art For Healing Foundation. We now have 12,000 works of art installed in 83 institutions, including psychiatry departments, long-term care facilities, women's shelters and hospitals. We also do a lot of work with Royal Victoria Hospital, where the whole idea started.

It's been a rewarding experience, with many people telling us that the artwork in the corridors make them leave their room, with their IV and their nightgown. They just walk the hallways and look at the photos on the walls.

Ultimately, though, it's about the art. Art changes attitudes, emotional states and pain perceptions. It creates hope and positivity and it helps people cope with difficulties. It transforms a person's outlook and a way of being in the world.

We see the art as a message – a message of healing – and we're the messenger."

– As told to Anna Sharratt