



Discovery Arts



## Children discover joy through art during a time of illness

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She wears a crown adorned with pink and blue rhinestones, epitomizing the sign of a California princess emblazoned on the back of her red wagon. Natalie's attendant carefully guides her 'carriage' through the hallways of the Mattel Children's Hospital at UCLA, leading the 3-year-old to the playroom. The bustling room stands in stark contrast to the sterile, almost quiet halls of the hospital.

Marilyn Clements, who is at the hospital as part of an art program, greets her near the door. "You beautiful girl," she says with excitement. Inside, the room is filled with music. Hanging costumes of lions and princesses line the walls, and tables of crafts are spread throughout the room.

Clements is a co-founder and executive director of Discovery Arts, a program which brings music, art, dance and drama to children with cancer, serious blood disorders and life-threatening illnesses while they live in the hospital receiving treatment. The nonprofit organization offers its entertainment services to Mattel the first Wednesday of every month. Clements and program director Mary Borkett also offer weekly programs in four other hospitals in the L.A. and Orange County region. "I think when a child can relax and get in a creative environment, they can kind of transcend their situation and maybe forget for a few minutes that they're sick," Clements said.

She said she founded the program 13 years ago when she was asked to direct a show as a professional choreographer at the Jonathan Jacques Children's Cancer Center in Long Beach. After that show was over, she said she could not get images of the children out of her mind. "It was like someone was tapping on my shoulder," Clements said, adding that the experience prompted her to establish the program. Thirteen years later, the program is serving over 3,000 children.

One of the crafts offered for the day is the decoration of paper hearts. The children are asked to write on their heart, "Today I feel ..." and decorate a paper doll afterward to reflect their mood. Nine-year-old Anthony Vosdoganis, dressed in a Spider-Man costume, says he is feeling powerful and strong as he decorates his heart. Thirteen-year-old Felix Tronco says he is feeling super as he transforms his doll into a Superman figure. Natalie is dressed as a princess in a pink tutu and jeweled shoes. Her mother, wearing a hat of leaves, asks her if she wants to dance to a Christina Aguilera song playing in the background. She nods. As her mom picks her up and begins to shake her daughter's hips, Natalie starts to bob her head to the rhythm of the music. For a moment, she seems to forget the intravenous and nasal tubes that alleviate her pulmonary and breathing problems.

"The children are usually pumped up in medicine and pretty lethargic, but by the time they leave us, they've got costumes on and they've been singing and dancing. The difference they make in a day is what keeps me coming back," Borkett said. Julie Vosdoganis, Anthony's mother, said she sees the difference having a few hours away from hospital life makes for her son. "I think it's really good for the kids. It gives them a break for the day, makes them happy, and gives them a little bit more of real life than usual," Vosdoganis said. "(Anthony) really enjoys it. It takes his mind off of why we're in here." Traveling from Idaho so her son can be treated for liver complications, Vosdoganis has taken time off work to live in the hospital with her son. And for the first time since Anthony has arrived at Mattel two months ago, he is healthy enough to wear street clothes once again.

The faith Clements sees in her patients "an innocence that goes beyond their illness" is a faith she said keeps her heart in her job. "They teach you in this situation and in many horrible situations about tremendous faith, tremendous courage, and they're just beyond their years. "They're amazing and I feel blessed to be near them," Clements said.