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Art installation highlights the ‘Human Element’

Participants patients at Westminster Free Clinic

By Becca Whitnall

becca@theacorn.com

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3 Points Mentioned



CREATIVE OUTLET—Westminster Free Clinic patient Maria Vargas of [Thousand Oaks](#) asks physician volunteer Lori Shocket about adding more to her painting of a person walking down a road while she waits to be seen by a doctor on June 4. **IRIS SMOOT/Acorn Newspapers**

For 20 years, the Conejo Valley's Westminster Free Clinic has offered healthcare, medicine and counseling to those in the community who might not otherwise receive those services. Recently it offered some of its patients something entirely different: the opportunity to take part in an art installation piece.

Lori and Neil Shocket, regular volunteers at the clinic, earlier this month asked cardiac and diabetic patients to take part in the couple's Human Element project, an art concept that mimics the periodic table and places the “human element”—identified by the symbol Hu—in the middle.

The idea behind Human Element is something the [Thousand Oaks](#) pair, both doctors, have been encouraging for a long while and across many countries. It refers to treating people with compassion and stresses the importance of communication between doctors and their patients.

More specifically, it reminds doctors about the human element when they talk to their patients— a topic Neil has lectured on during volunteer missions to places like [Nepal](#), [Kenya](#) and the United States' Appalachia.

Lori, 58, earned her medical degree a year and a half ago but has not yet applied for residency. She shadows her husband Neil, 62, on the mission trips. He is an emergency room doctor at Kaiser Permanente West Los Angeles Medical Center.

“(The human element is) reminding you to take that extra minute



ART THERAPY—Canvas paintings depicting elements of healthy living are lined up to dry on a table at the

to reach your hand out and touch somebody when you're speaking to them, having a little compassion," Lori said. "You can just treat the broken leg or you can have compassion for their predicament and the disruption in their life."

The original Human Element art installation piece is made up of 118 element blocks, each with an archival giclee print of an original electron on which the element symbol and its associated definition is imposed. In the middle is a 35-square-inch Hu block. The entire piece, roughly 5 feet by 16 feet, will be on exhibit July 12 through Aug. 25 at the Institute for Genetic Medicine Art Gallery at USC's Keck Medical School.

Joining it will be the work of the Westminster Free Clinic patients.

Westminster Free Clinic in [Thousand Oaks](#). Physician volunteer and artist Lori Shocket organized the project, called The Human Element, in which cardiac and diabetic patients have the opportunity to paint while they wait to be seen by a doctor. Patient Juan Olivares, inset, proudly holds up the painting he finished while waiting for his clinic appointment. Photos by IRIS SMOOT/Acorn Newspapers

Hoping the idea will go viral, the Shockets have expanded the singular installation to an art project where various groups create their own forms of the periodic table, which is what they did at the clinic.

"We asked the patients—they thought we were a little crazy —to paint pictures about things they'd learned about their own disease that they could teach someone else," Lori said, adding that volunteers were reluctant at first because it was so different from the things they usually do. But once a few people joined in, others followed suit and painted with intensity, she said.

"These are people you wouldn't expect to (participate)," her husband added. "They're housekeepers, gardeners, busboys. They've never been exposed to art in most cases and they just jumped at the chance."

In total, about 50 patients participated. They painted images of eating healthy food, exercising, losing weight, checking sugar levels, taking medication properly and reducing stress, Neil said.

Painting itself is a way to reduce stress, according to Lisa Safaeinili, Westminster's executive director.

"I believe art is a therapy. Getting to be creative and step out of your daily routine helps you relax," she said.

When they were done painting, instead of signing their full names, the patients used their initials—a capital letter for their first names and lower case for their last names to mimic the symbols for elements of the periodic table. The patients' ages served as the atomic numbers. Their installation piece is called "Human Element: People Helping People."

Up until now, Safaeinili said, art therapy hadn't been among the clinic's many offerings.

"Our patients are under incredible stress economically and financially and, on top of that, they have these

health issues. If we can offer something to help with the stress, we're open to it," she said.

Although the clinic doesn't offer art therapy on a regular basis, Safaeinili said she's open to adding it to the list of services if the right volunteer were to approach the clinic.

"The neat thing about the nonprofit world is we can say 'yes' to a lot of things without all the red tape," she said.

The most important thing, she added, is that the patients really seemed to enjoy it.

For more information about the Human Element or Westminster

Free Clinic, visit thehumanelementproject.com and westminsterclinic.org.

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