Sadako Sasaki was at home when the atomic bomb was dropped near her home on Hiroshima Island, Japan. She was a toddler, full of energy and full of life. No one knew what was to come.

Her story is like so many patients who find they have a form of cancer. One day they are living life, feeling fine, even sweating the small stuff. The next day, they hear the “C” word: cancer. Sadako was a healthy little girl who went from running on the playground to a hospital bed with less than a year to live. Until you have firsthand experience, no one really knows what that must feel like.

One portion of the Comprehensive Cancer Care Program at Presbyterian/St. Luke’s (P/SL) Hospital in Denver, CO, is the bone marrow transplantation (BMT) unit. This unit is a sterile environment that becomes home for weeks, sometimes months, for patients with cancer who have had an allogenic transplantation. Patients’ lives change forever in ways almost unimaginable.

As a part of treatment, the Healing Arts Program was developed for patients to explore creativity as a way of healing the emotional stress of illness. The unknown medical procedures and unknown outcome can be frightening; patients have a lot of time to process information. The mind needs the creative outlet as a way to bring back a sense of control and normalcy during the hospital experience.

“When I’m creating, I find moments of peace and comfort, a welcome feeling when all else seems out of control,” says Kat, a former patient in the BMT unit.

The Healing Arts Program caters to the individual and his or her unique creative needs, providing tools for use at any time of the day. Available tools include many different forms of art, including drawing, stenciling, and coloring using various types of media.

It was through the Healing Arts Program that patients learned about Sadako Sasaki, who suffered from leukemia. Sadako’s best friend came to visit while she was in the hospital and folded a gold piece of paper into a paper crane. She told Sadako about a Japanese legend: Make 1,000 cranes and you will be granted a wish. Sadako made origami cranes each day after that visit and wrote on the wings, “I will write peace on your wings and you will fly around the world.” Sadako passed away on October 25, 1955, after making 644 cranes. Her friends folded the rest and buried 1,000 cranes with Sadako. Many lessons can be learned from Sadako’s legacy, but the biggest is that of hope for the future.

In addition to the message of hope, the crane-making process itself is healing...
on an individual level. Making cranes allows patients to magically transform a flat piece of paper into a beautiful three-dimensional sculpture providing a sense of pride and accomplishment. At the same time, patients gain increased range of motion in the wrist and fingers that may help reduce some side effects of certain medications. The finished crane often sits on the window sill, brightening patients’ rooms with the colorful patterns found on origami papers. Each crane is infused with its own unique meaning for the creator.

In the fall of 2009, patients in the BMT unit, their families, and staff at P/SL worked as a unified team to create 1,000 cranes. Patients and staff taught each other how to make the cranes. Sizes ranged from large to small, with some cranes made in such minute detail that the creators had to use tweezers to construct them. The cranes were being created inside patients’ rooms, at the nurses’ stations—basically everywhere you went. The message infused into each folded crane is the desire for hope and peace throughout the healing journey. A tremendous sense of connection existed between all involved. Caregivers, whether staff, family members, or friends, sometimes feel a sense of helplessness. The cranes, in one small symbolic action, were a way to show the desire for the best possible outcome for all going through the arduous BMT process.

One patient said, “I had to get over the initial frustrations of not knowing how to fold cranes, but once I got the hang of it, I couldn’t stop. It was very therapeutic.” Another patient, having a particular struggle several days after her crane-making demonstration, glanced at the two colorful cranes sitting at her bedside and remembered the message of peace. She started making cranes and could not stop.

“At some point in time I was feeling better. Just looking at those cranes I made was a reminder to me that peace is just a crane away.”

More than 1,600 cranes were created and arranged by color and size onto four large panels and put on display on the walls inside the BMT unit. Each panel represents the seasons of change starting with springtime. As patients come through the hallways of the BMT unit for the first time, they usually are unsure as to what their journey will be. The crane panels are meant to represent a fresh new start. Although patients will face many ups and downs along the way, the journey can also be filled with peace. Seeing the cranes and realizing they were made with the purpose of inspiring hope for a patient going through the transplantation process is uplifting—patients helping other patients.

The crane project will be fondly remembered by staff members in the years to come. One staff member said, “It felt good to be a part of a project where we were all working together for the good of the cause.”

The cranes remind us of those that came through the unit’s hallways and have now moved on. Although Sadako’s life was cut short, her message of peace continues to live.

“It brings tears to my eyes to think of all the patients that worked on the cranes, some of whom aren’t with us anymore,” says Jessica, a nurse in the BMT unit. The crane panels are a tribute to patients’ amazing life stories and their contribution to the desire of peace for all within the walls of the BMT unit.

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