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## A Healing Hearth

By THERESA SULLIVAN BARGER  
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Judy Potts is the kind of woman who counts her blessings - blessings like Ken, her loving husband of 41 years, and being able to dance at her son's wedding and play with her grandson.

Potts doesn't let her six-year struggle with ovarian cancer get her down. But because of her illness, she retired early, and she spends a lot of time in her Vernon home, especially in her living room.

So she welcomed the chance for a free consultation from interior redesigner Lisa Skelley as part of a program for women with ovarian cancer offered by the national Interior Redesign Industry Specialists organization.

Before she came, "There was something about the room that I was not comfortable with. I didn't know what it was," Potts says. "Now I love the room. Whether it made a difference health-wise, I don't know. But I feel better in the room."

Research shows a link exists between one's environment and one's outlook. Roger Ulrich, an architecture professor at Texas A&M University who is an international expert in "evidence-based design," concluded that hospital design influences patients and found a link between the physical design of health-care facilities and patient safety, stress levels, how well patients respond to medical treatments and overall quality of care.

Colors can be soothing and buoying, or they can be depressing. Details as simple as removing clutter and placing furniture strategically can make a room more inviting and comfortable, designers say.

In homes, hospices and health-care settings, there has been a growing effort to create an uplifting environment for people who are ill. Artwork, calming wall colors and careful furniture placement promote good feelings.

For example, the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington has more than 1,500 original works of art in its collection, most of them donated, and the paintings, sculptures, quilts, photographs and murals are displayed throughout the hospital and clinics.

Seeing something of beauty is comforting in a time of stress, particularly when someone is dealing with illness - their own, a loved one's or a patient's, says Celeste LeWitt, a hospital auxiliary volunteer who started collecting art for the hospital in 1979 and since has worked with a team of volunteers to manage the collection.

When Farmington resident Ray Elling was recuperating from a hip-replacement operation, there were times when he felt too weak to read, he says. He appreciated the artwork in the waiting room and hallways at UConn. What he enjoyed most, he says, was watching a video on the TV in his room that showed each piece of the hospital's artwork in leisurely sequence.

"It's quieting and restful," says Elling. "I think it makes a difference."

At UConn's Neag Comprehensive Cancer Center, when patients face Dr. Joel Levine at his desk, they see four floral watercolors by artist Betty Kern on the wall behind him. More than half his patients ask about the artwork in his office, Levine says, and talking about the art allows doctor and patient to connect as people.

"The purpose of the art is to pull you away from yourself," says Levine, co-director of the Colon Cancer Prevention Program. "Stress-reduction is not just a feel-good thing."

The Comprehensive Cancer Center at Rhode Island Hospital in Providence completed a four-year redesign in 2005 aimed at promoting wellness through a warm, inviting, cheerful environment, says Sandy Stamoulis, who served as senior vice president for cancer services and oversaw the work before retiring.

"Our mission was, when patients came, we knew we couldn't cure everyone, but we sure as hell could care for them," the former chief nurse says. Skeptics may dismiss the effort as a gimmick, but Stamoulis says she has witnessed the effects first-hand and is glad she delayed her retirement to finish the project.

"It was probably the best thing I ever did in my life. I lost a sister to breast cancer. There were lots of times I would see her sitting in the dark and being very depressed," she says. "It made me very aware of how important it was to treat not just the physical, but the emotional and spiritual."

In the radiation oncology clinic at the Comprehensive Cancer Center, AquaVista 500 fish aquariums that are only 4-1/2 inches thick hang on the wall in the waiting area like works of art. Patients waiting for radiation treatments, and their families, sit on benches across from the aquariums, watching the fish.

"It really seems to have a soothing effect," says Deborah Crowell, the practice manager for the clinic's physicians' group. "It's kind of relaxing."

Multiple studies back up her observations, showing that just five minutes with real or simulated natural settings can lower stress, lower blood pressure and lift people's spirits, reports Ulrich, the architecture professor.

What works in hospitals works in homes, too, says Skelley, the redesigner who helped Potts with her home. Your environment affects your spirit, says Skelley, owner of LJS Interiors in Avon. Having colors you like and good design doesn't have to mean making your home look like a page from a magazine.

"People think decorating is about looking nice and spending a lot of money," she says. "It doesn't have to be expensive. It has to be about surrounding yourself with things that you love and things that are meaningful to you."

Even before Skelley arrived to help, Potts had planned on painting the living room a deep lavender that reminds her of a sunset. Skelley suggested she buy some accent pillows in the same hue for her couch.

Skelley also moved the furniture to cluster it closer together and create a pathway from the entrance hall through the living room into the adjoining dining room. That eliminated the need to maneuver around furniture. Skelley also rearranged the chairs, grouped some angels from Potts' collection atop the entertainment center and made suggestions about accessories.

"It really made everything cozier and it really opened up the room," Potts says. "I don't know if [the alterations] changed my life, but they certainly have changed the feeling in the room. Friends say the room is so warm and cozy."

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