

Bringing the Healing Power of Art to PENN RADIATION ONCOLOGY: Q & A with Grace Childers, Art Therapy & Counseling

As Grace Childers can attest, sometimes you can't escape your destiny!

A graduate student studying Art Therapy and Counseling at Drexel University, Grace recently joined Penn Radiation Oncology and will be spending the next several months leading art therapy sessions within our department.



These sessions are free to patients and caregivers and are available in the Glass Lobby on:

- Mondays from 10 – 11:30 a.m. and 1 – 3 p.m.
- Tuesdays from 11 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. and 3 – 4 p.m.
- Friday from 10 a.m. – 12 p.m.

Recently, Grace spoke with us about her background and the constant presence of art throughout her life. We invite you to read what she had to share and encourage you to pop into one of her sessions to say hello and perhaps exercise your own creative energy!

Grace, why don't we begin by having you tell us a little bit about yourself and what led you to pursue art therapy?

I grew up near Washinton DC and was pursuing ballet seriously until I sustained an injury late in high school that forced me to stop dancing. So I channeled my creative energies into the fine and visual arts.

By the time I went to college, my focus had shifted more to healthcare, and I earned my bachelor's degree from the University of Notre Dame in Neuroscience and Behavior. But what I discovered in the course of my studies, is that there is more of an overlap with art in this field than I had expected. For example, when a person experiences trauma, it's often processed in a part of the brain that is very visual. So words and verbal processing aren't always helpful, but visual processing can be a very useful tool.

For 5 years after graduating I worked in healthcare consulting. Through this role, I spent time at Walter Reed Medical Center, which has a fantastic art therapy program for service members with traumatic brain injury. It was here that I discovered the impact that this approach can have.

This – and my husband's work – is what led me to Philadelphia and Drexel's program.

What is it you'll be doing at Penn Radiation Oncology and what are you hoping to achieve?

Through firsthand experience with my own family, I know how difficult cancer can be on the patient and care giver. My hope is that I can help people learn to use art as a means of coping with the diagnosis and treatment, while providing a respite for people who need a supportive space to relax or regulate their nervous system.

I'm currently offering Group Open Studios, but I am also open to scheduling individual sessions.

For my own purposes, I would like to gain more experience facilitating art therapy in the medical setting. I also want to better understand what is most helpful for people in terms of artistic interventions.

What can people expect when they come to a session with you?

I'll be offering a wide array of mediums which people can explore, including paints (watercolor, acrylic, and tempura), pastels, clay, and then markers, colored and regular pencils, and gel pens.

Beyond painting, sketching, and sculpting, we'll be doing some collages and origami.

When a person comes to a session, they'll often be provided with a couple of prompts or options to help get the creative process started. For example, I recently offered people the opportunity to create a watercolor window pane or a word doodle.

People are welcome to stay as long as they want. In fact, some patients will start a project before treatment, and then come back to it that same day after their treatment or the next time they're at the hospital.

Now for some trickier questions. Favorite sports team and favorite Philadelphia food?

Oh no, now I'm going to get into trouble! I admit that being from DC, I am a Commanders fan – but my true heart lies with the Notre Dame Fighting Irish.

As for food, I've loved the ice cream from 1-900-Ice-Cream near Rittenhouse Square. They have awesome scooped ice cream, but they're really known for their cookie sandwiches. Check them out on Instagram!