



Teaching Artists Carry Tunes and Smiles to Hospitalized Kids

Artists from the ArtsConnect and Arts Teach programs at Segerstrom Center for the Arts bring their talents to special audience.

BY CORINNE JONES FLOCKEN

The door to the boy's hospital room swings open and he looks up, his expression a mix of curiosity and worry. He wonders who it will be this time. Maybe the food service lady with his dinner tray—which is cool, as long as there's a pudding cup. More likely, it's a doctor or nurse in cartoon character scrubs with a stethoscope and a ton of questions. He knows they're trying to be all helpful and stuff, but the whole thing is still kind of scary. Even for a 10-year-old.

So the boy crosses his fingers and looks at his mom, putting on the cooperative smile she likes. And then his face relaxes and his smile becomes genuine, and soon everybody in the room—his folks and even his brother—is grinning. Well, he thinks, check this out! It's a guy with an acoustic guitar and some sheet music. He says his name is Zak and he's from a place called Segerstrom Center for the Arts and he just stopped by to see if the boy wants to play a couple tunes with him.

So the boy, who just happens to have his own guitar on hand to pass the long hours at the hospital, spends a few minutes learning one of the songs from this guy's latest CD and strumming along with him. They sit side by side on the hospital bed and play and sing a little. Then they just talk about how the boy is learning the guitar, and the man's career as a musician (turns out he was nominated for a Grammy, for real!) and just how generally cool it is that they're both musicians.

And the whole time, nobody says a word about him being sick, which is awesome because sometimes it seems like that's all grown-ups want to talk about.

Nice, he thinks. Maybe even better than a pudding cup.

That visit made an impression on Zak Morgan, too. "Music is uplifting," notes Morgan, a Center Arts Teach artist. "It's fun and universal, and it's a great way to take our minds off suffering, whether it's our own pain or that of someone we care about. Anytime we are given the chance to lift the spirits of others, we should take it without hesitation. It was a really good reminder to all of us in that room that being sick is a condition, but it's not our identity." Morgan's releases include the Grammy® Award-nominated CD *When Bullfrogs Croak*, and his latest, *The Candy Machine*, and his Arts Teach programs include using music and storytelling to share with children the joy of reading and creative writing.

"The music broke the ice and established an instant connection between me—a total stranger—and this young man and his family," Morgan recalls. "When we started playing a song together, you could see his perception of himself change from being a patient to being a kid and a musician."

Working through local volunteers with Radio Lollipop International located at Children's Hospital of Orange County (CHOC), Segerstrom Center brings ArtsConnect and Arts Teach performers to patients, connecting with them through on-air interviews and performances on the hospital's in-house radio station. Radio Lollipop International is based in London and has stations in 25 medical centers worldwide, including three in the United States.

The shows are a mix of kid-friendly talk and music created and broadcast just for the children there. Listeners who are able to leave their rooms are invited to come to the lobby and watch the interview through the colorful studio's glass walls while they do arts and crafts led by Radio Lollipop staff.



Jake Moulton



The Alley Cats

A little girl in pink pajamas was one of the patients who made the trip downstairs to see Morgan's show. Riding in a red wagon pulled by her mother, she was invited into the studio. When he was off mic, Morgan took a seat on the floor and chatted quietly with the child about Disney characters (her favorite is Cinderella). When he offered to let her play his guitar, he gently supported the instrument at her level with one hand and curled the fingers of the other around the guitar's neck to form a chord, while she trailed her small fingers over the strings. She smiled shyly at the music she made. As they returned to the elevators (she happily clutched her Radio Lollipop prize of Disney princess pencils, given to her by Morgan), her mother shared that the visit was extra special to them both because it marked the first time she was well enough to leave her floor after weeks in the hospital.

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Vybration

The men and women who share these special moments are chosen by education department staff from the Center's extensive roster of musicians, dancers and theater artists: They are among the best in their field for both the caliber of their performance skills and their ability to work with children of all ages, interests and abilities.

As one Center staff member put it, particularly important in the hospital setting is an artist's ability to engage a child on the child's terms, whether that means sitting quietly on the edge of the bed and strumming a few chords or reaching hundreds of young listeners during an animated or inspirational interview or performance on a Radio Lollipop show. In his on-air chat with deejay "Carly," Morgan integrated themes that are important to youth, like imagination and friends and family, into motivational messages.

This giving, open spirit is a constant throughout the Center's Arts Teach roster but let's face it—certain art forms simply don't work in a compact radio station and a hospital room. Dance troupes, jugglers or visual artists are not an option, and neither are bands with multiple or large instruments (you do not want to try to squeeze a harp into that Radio Lollipop studio!).

But small groups and solo acts like the whimsical pop of Zak Morgan work well within the parameters, and this has been the program's primary pool to date. A range of musical styles has been showcased so far in an effort to expose the youngsters to genres outside their normal realm. These include the '50s and '60s doo-wop of the Alley Cats, the *a capella* harmonies of Vybration and the edgier beatbox tunes of "human drum machine" Jake Moulton.

Talena Mara, vice president of education at the Center, says more visits are planned this year. And, she adds, she is looking into ways to expand the program to other organizations that serve children and families.

"It's clear that the arts have a force about them that touches the heart," notes Mara, who has worked as a professional and as a volunteer in arts therapy programs for special-needs audiences. "When you're experiencing something in your life that's very challenging, emotionally or physically or both, being exposed to the arts can compel strong emotion and through that, many kinds of healing."

Mara added that while she is proud of the Center's programs for grade school through college youth, she

also would like to reach beyond the classroom.

"We're very lucky to have had the structure and the support to achieve what we have in the schools so far," she says, "and we will continue to work hard at that. But I also see the Center as an organization that can help the *entire* community. We have the artistic resources and the talent in place, so now it's a matter of developing more of these wonderful projects that serve the community well and bring us together."

Corinne Jones Flocken writes frequently about education programs for Center publications.



Zak Morgan

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— Zak Morgan, Segerstrom Center Arts Teach artist