

The intersection of Art & SCIENCE



Dr. Rex Lagerstrom



Dr. Russell May



By: Dr. Rex Lagerstrom



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By: Dr. Michelle D. Palazzo

By Amy Board Higgs

There are those who might say that science and the fine arts don't mix — one comes from logic and reason, while the other is borne of whim and creativity. For three local doctors, medicine and art are the perfect complement, each for different reasons.

For Russell May, M.D., internist with Dupont Internal Medicine, part of KentuckyOne Health, art is an accidental hobby he acquired after inheriting a collection of paints, brushes and canvases from an artist patient who passed away about 30 years ago. Prior to that, he had been a lifelong collector, always on the hunt for original pieces at flea markets and yard sales.

Primarily a painter in oils, May said he is a “total amateur” and has had no formal training. He enjoys painting seascapes and coastal scenes. He does not have

a studio, and chooses to do his work outdoors, usually in his backyard during the warm months of the year.

May has sold some art on occasion, but he added, “I’m really not in the business of being an artist.” He enjoys giving his paintings as gifts to friends and family.

“I get a better appreciation of the art world by doing it myself,” May said. “I just enjoy having something to hang on the wall that others might enjoy, too.”

May believes that his profession and his passion for art are a perfect blend of the scientific and creative mind, but for him, art is an escape.

“It gives me a great diversion from what I do every day in the office or at the hospital,” he said.

For Michelle D. Palazzo, M.D., plastic surgeon with Kleinert Kutz, her artistic

pursuits are not a diversion from her work, but an asset to it.

“Art is very complementary to surgery,” she said. “Studying art has helped me with the visual component of surgery because both are three-dimensional and very hands on. Both allow me to use my imagination.”

After earning an undergraduate degree in biomedical engineering, Palazzo said she considered going into orthopedics, but found that the treatments and techniques in that specialty were “too big and clunky.” Through her studies in medical school, she was exposed to the “fine art” of surgery and fell in love with it.

An amateur watercolor painter, Palazzo had always been “crafty” but became interested in fine art when she took a painting class on a lark during her residency in St. Louis in the early 2000s.

She likes to reproduce and interpret photos of people, places and things that have some meaning to her, as well as landscapes and scenery. She said she finds that her subjects have evolved as she has learned new techniques, such as using latex masks and salt to create texture. She added that her medical training makes her a better artist, and her art makes her a better surgeon.

For Rex Lagerstrom, M.D., internist with Dupont Internal Medicine, part of KentuckyOne Health, art promotes healing. In fact, Lagerstrom said that art and medicine were never an either/or proposition. He always knew he would pursue both as careers.

“I’ve never seen art and medicine as being separate. ... The best type of thinking combines both the left brain and right brain,” he said.

Photos | Kathleen McMahon

Lagerstrom earned undergraduate degrees in art and organic chemistry, then completed an apprenticeship in stained glass with European glass master, Peter Eichhorn, at Fenestra Studios in Louisville in 1980. He was accepted to the University of Louisville School of Medicine on the same day he was accepted into an MFA program in painting at the Memphis College of Art, but chose UofL.

Since then, Lagerstrom has pursued both of his careers with equal passion. As a professional artist, he works in stained glass and has designed hundreds of windows in Louisville over the years. He also is accomplished in oil painting, wood engraving and printmaking. Much of his work focuses on religious imagery, ocean and boat images, and simple symbols. His most recent public show was held at the Huff Gallery at Spalding University in December. He has an

ongoing show of sorts in his medical office, where he displays “cheerful, uplifting and colorful” pieces for the benefit of his patients.

Lagerstrom’s illustrations have appeared in more than 40 medical journals, and he did the original textbook illustrations for the Jarvik-7 artificial heart based on first-hand observations of William DeVries, M.D., in the operating room.

Today, Lagerstrom goes to his dedicated art studio at 812 E. Broadway on Fridays, but he finds ways to work on his art every day. It is common for him to carve wood blocks during his lunch hour.

“For me, art is a way to really clear your brain,” Lagerstrom said. “It’s a kind of meditation. If you want to be a good doctor, you’ve got to be really clear and focused, and dedicated to what you’re doing. Art has always helped me do that.”