Recognizing that art enhances well-being and strengthens resiliency, the McGovern Center for Humanities & Ethics developed the “Arts and Resilience” Program — a monthly series that invites writers, musicians, actors, painters, dancers, and other artists to McGovern Medical School to perform for students, faculty, staff, and the broader school community.

This new program is especially meaningful in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey and is a natural fit for the McGovern Center, which promotes the humanistic dimension of medicine.

“The experience of art—a beautiful painting, a soulful piece of music, a dramatic aria, a creative theatrical production—enriches each of us by refreshing our imagination and stimulating our own creativity,” said Dean Barbara J. Stoll. “By providing a moment for emotional reflection, we hope that the Arts and Resilience program will enhance the well-being of our medical school community.”

The series premiered in September with a poetry reading and conversation with Fady Joudah, M.D., an award-winning poet and physician. Dr. Joudah, who completed his residency training in internal medicine at McGovern Medical School, won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition in 2007. He read his poetry and recounted experiences from his life both inside and outside
of medicine. He said being a both doctor and a writer has enriched his life in unique ways.

Joudah said his writing has been enriched by the “language of medicine,” which he showed through several poems that focused on previous academic studies such as an experience in an anatomy lab. He emphasized the need for medical professionals to look at their practice through the lens of the humanities.

Pianist Mark Vogel brought his insights into music and physics for October’s program, focusing the use of sounds waves and rhythm to help the healing process. He admitted he doesn’t entirely grasp all the deeper, subconscious effects music has on individuals but said insight from musicians like himself gives a window into the science behind it. He performed selected pieces by Bach, Chopin, and others, and concluded with a piece by Vince Guaraldi.

Jane Weiner, a professional dancer and founder of Hope Stone Inc., addressed the intersection of dancing and healthy living for November’s

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event. Weiner said she comes from a medical family and reminisced about her late father, a pediatrician, and about her brother, a pediatric surgeon who worked in Afghanistan. She talked about her father’s busy schedule and the complexity of having dinner together and connected her own experience with the busy lives of professional families today. She ultimately said there is “burnout in every field these days,” and spoke about dance and its relation to neuroplasticity.

Actor and playwright Ruddy Cravens visited in December with local actors to perform a reading of “Wondergirl,” a story about a husband and wife grappling with the health of their unborn twins who may be born prematurely. As the story unfolds, one of the twins dies shortly after birth but the other—a girl—survives. After the situation worsens, the dramatic tension intersects with the human drama in an emotional finale.

Some of the story’s background came from Cravens’ own experiences losing a child. While he called the experience “horrific,” he said he hoped the play would help bring a sense of what typical people go through when faced with the uncertainty of losing a loved one and the need for medical professionals to avoid having a “dispassionate distance” from patients facing insurmountable odds.

March’s program welcomed Houston-based accordionist Roberto Rodriguez and Dr. Roger Wood, music historian and author. The two tackled the origins and evolution of the accordion, or what Rodriguez called an “orchestra in a box.” Wood spoke about its earliest form first made in Berlin in 1822 and its spread across Europe and into North America, and Rodriguez performed several songs while talking about the more technical aspects of the instrument. Rodriguez called the event a “great opportunity” to speak about his experiences with the instrument and share his knowledge with medical students.

“We are so fortunate that Houston has a vibrant arts community—exceptional visual art, music, opera, dance, theater, and amazingly talented artists—and are very grateful that these wonderful artists are helping to enrich our school,” Dean Stoll said.

Progress Notes
by Fady Joudah

The age of portrait is drugged. Beauty is symmetry so rare it’s a mystery. My left eye is smaller than my right, my big mouth shows my nice teeth perfectly aligned like Muslims in prayer. My lips an accordion. Each sneeze a facial thumbprint. One corner of my mouth hangs downward when I want to hold a guffaw hostage. Bell’s Palsy perhaps or what Mark Twain said about steamboat piloting, that a doctor’s unable to look upon the blush in a young beauty’s face without thinking it could be a fever, a malar rash, a butterfly announcing a wolf. Can I lie face down now as cadavers posed on first anatomy lesson? I didn’t know mine was a woman until three weeks later we turned her over. Out of reverence there was to be no untimely exposure of donors, our patrons who were covered in patches of scrubs-green dish towels, and by semester’s end we were sick of all that, tossed mega livers and mammoth hearts into lab air and caught them. My body was Margaret. That’s what the death certificate said when it was released before finals. The cause of her death? Nothing memorable, frail old age. But the colonel on table nineteen with an accessory spleen had put a bullet through his temple, a final prayer. Not in entry or exit were there skull cracks to condemn the house of death, no shattered glass in the brain, only a smooth tunnel of deep violet that bloomed in concentric circles. The weekends were lonely. He had the most beautiful muscles of all 32 bodies that were neatly arranged, zipped up as if a mass grave had been disinterred. Or when unzipped and facing the ceiling had cloth over their eyes as if they’d just been executed. Gray silver hair, chiseled countenance, he was sixty-seven, a veteran of more than one war. I had come across that which will end me, extend me, at least once, without knowing it.

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