Professor Finds Balance Between Art and Medicine

College of Medicine ? Phoenix
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Cynthia Standley always knew she wanted to wear a white coat, she just didn't know if it would be for science or art.

Standley, director of the Program of Art in Medicine and a founding faculty member at the UA College of Medicine ? Phoenix, has been a medical educator for more than 25 years.

"I love teaching physiology and neuroscience to medical and health professional students," Standley said. "Every time I meet a new class, I find myself continuing to learn things and I find my time with them uplifting and inspiring. I really enjoy the active learning and teaching in the model of the flipped classroom. That's where you can really see the lightbulbs turn on."

Standley did not always see herself as a teacher. At one point, she wanted to become a scientific illustrator. Instead she opted for a science route and kept art on the side.

"I have always been interested in the brain. I was an aerobics instructor in college and one of my co-workers was a medical student at Wayne State University and I happened to mention to her that I loved learning about the brain," Standley said. "She connected me with a neurophysiologist, who then became my mentor, and next thing you know, I graduated with a Ph.D. in physiology."

Standley received her bachelor's degree in biology and a doctorate in physiology from Wayne State University in Detroit. Her first faculty appointment was at the Detroit Medical Center, but ultimately she moved to Phoenix to become part of the inaugural faculty at the Arizona College of Osteopathic Medicine in Glendale. She was there for 10 years before she helped open the School of Osteopathic Medicine in Mesa. Eventually, she found her way to the UA College of Medicine ? Phoenix in 2008.

Standley started at the college as a research professor with a lab in the Department of Basic Medical Sciences. Her research was in the area of preeclampsia, seizures and magnesium sulfate. She closed her lab a few years ago to focus on medical education research. Her current work is funded by the Team-Based Learning Collaborative, a national organization that encourages the use of team-based learning, a teaching technique that involves students applying course content in team exercises.

In 2014, Standley started the Art in Medicine program under the Department of Bioethics and Medical Humanism to help medical students sharpen their skills in observation and description and improve their critical thinking and communication skills. In the program, medical students are challenged to explore the range of human emotion and perception of the world as conveyed visually.

"Medical students are taught to recognize patterns using diagnostic algorithms, to think very critically, with an eye toward details," Standley said. "Art in Medicine expands on this and
provides them with opportunities to think more openly. Instead of listening with an ear toward a preconceived conclusion, we encourage listening for understanding, looking for the details that should capture their attention. This way, we are promoting divergent, out-of-the-box thinking and equipping our students to make meaningful connections between disparate fragments. With innovative practices, we can improve the health of the patients and, ultimately, promote more humanistic care."

Several years ago, Standley attended an Educators Night at the Phoenix Art Museum, where she met the museum’s director of education. They brainstormed a way to involve medical students in viewing art that could relate to what they were learning in their clinical skills course. The program has been so successful that they now offer six evening programs a year at the museum for College of Medicine ? Phoenix students, faculty and staff.

Within the Art in Medicine program, Standley collaborated with Gary Glazner of the Alzheimer’s Poetry Project, based in New York, to start the college’s Creativity in Elder Care program, which trains medical students in the use of creative expression to improve care in patients with dementia.

"I am really proud of the Creativity in Elder Care Program," Standley said. "It's been great to have this program recognized by the Arizona Commission on the Arts. So, while I didn't go to school for art, it is awesome that I can now bring art into my daily life at work."

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