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# Nurturing Wellness Through Art

By **Kent Anderson** Photos by **K.O. Rinearson**

What constitutes health? While there may be a simple answer to that question – “an absence of disease,” perhaps – the reality is quite complex. It encompasses not only the body, but the mind as well, and the intangible that is often called the “soul.” Human health and wellness has many faces, and in one unassuming building on West Reno, those faces are being nurtured in a multitude of ways.

For more than 30 years, the OKC Indian Clinic has provided a full range of services to Native Americans in the Oklahoma City metro area. Internal and family medicine, pediatrics, dental, optometry, pharmacy, behavioral health... it's all available in one location, under the auspices of this remarkable non-profit organization. The clinic saw more than 9,000 patients last year alone.

Since 2007, the clinic has added a new layer to its operation, a component that feeds the soul and nurtures health in more than one way. The Art of Healing Gallery has brought together the works of five Native American artists, known collectively as Urban 5, in a gallery space within the walls of the clinic. In the facility's behavioral health center, the art is incorporated into the healing process itself.

“It goes into mind, body, spirit,” says Gerald Cournoyer (Oglala Lakota), one of the driving creative forces behind the gallery. “There are

Native people who have lost their belief system in the higher power, and I incorporate that, as does every one of these artists. Any way we can connect to that spirit is important. We all see a need for some type of healing. When we found out that the mental health people were bringing patients in to view the art, it took on a whole other meaning.”

Urban 5 includes some well-known names in the world of Indian art: Marwin Begaye (Navajo), whose works often focus on the epidemic of diabetes among Native peoples; Cournoyer, who embraces spirituality by incorporating prayer before creating each painting; Shan Goshorn (Eastern Band Cherokee), who uses multi-media to create curative images inspired by the natural world; Brent Greenwood (Ponca/



“Across the Mountains” by Gerald Cournoyer



“Illusion” by Gerald Cournoyer



“For the Children”  
by Gerald Cournoyer



“Industrial Trade Blanket #8”  
by Shan Goshorn



Artist Gerald Cournoyer in front of “Spiritual Elements”

## Glimpse *The OKC Indian Clinic*

asaw), who uses his heritage to document the old ways of life while addressing modern issues such as health and wellness; and Thomas Poolaw (Kiowa/Delaware), utilizing the technique of combining photographs and paint to inspire thought in the viewer.

The gallery was born after the clinic's annual fundraiser a few years ago, an event which included an art show and sale. Steve Barse, community liaison for the clinic, observed that the bids for the artworks were seriously undervalued, and he was searching for a way to help the artists.

"As we talked about the mission of the clinic, and Indian art, and how those might blend, it ultimately wound up with us asking them to affiliate with us," Barse says. "The philosophy has become spiritual. Just prior to us opening the doors to the gallery, we got the artists together for a meal, and Gerald brought his pipe. He got up and talked and we had a pipe ceremony. Everyone had a chance to express themselves, and then we prayed. That's the genesis of the art gallery. It became something different, it became something special."



"Dancer" by Marwin Begaye



"Swan" by Brent Greenwood



"Shadow of Messages" by Gerald Cournoyer

It became even more unique when the clinic's behavioral health team created a "healing room" with the artwork on the walls. "The people who have seen the art have responded to it," Barse says.

"There's a trust," agrees D.J. Bartiest, one of the clinical therapists. "They feel safer and ready to explore and express themselves."

Outside the healing room, the main body of the gallery is located in what was once the clinic's executive office area. However, the clinic is a victim of its own success. They've outgrown their environs, and the gallery now shares space with the public health nursing staff. The clinic is on the lookout for more space in which to expand its operation.

Still, there is an undeniable power in the images on display. Many of them are available for sale, with 60 percent of proceeds going to the artist and the remaining 40 percent being reinvest-

ed in the clinic's mission of providing health care to Oklahoma City's urban Native American population.

The concept has begun to attract attention beyond Oklahoma as well. The University of South Dakota is hosting an exhibition of Urban 5 this month. The gallery has also submitted a proposal and portfolios for an exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

"It's about prayer, and it's about symbology," says Gerald Cournoyer, "about knowing who we are as Indian people, and where we come from."

Native Americans have come from many different and diverse traditions, but in this time and venue, they have come forth to a place of healing... the Art of Healing, as manifested in the OKC Indian Clinic.

The OKC Indian Clinic is located at 4913 W. Reno, west of Meridian, and may be reached at 948.4900. ■



"Buffalo Silver" by Thomas Poolaw