

**Casey:** Can you just share a brief summary of what the Artist-in-Residence program is and your role?

**Kiamsha:** So the artist in residence program was started in 2001. You need to check with Shanti just to make sure but that's when I came in for the trainings so it's a program that allows local artists to bring their gifts into a hospital setting for the patients, their families, the staff. Just the environment. It's to bring healing arts to folks, which is an opportunity for them to open up in whatever direction they need to. So the artist-in-residence program started with a tremendous community of artists that span from visual to dance to music to writers. To the written word, to the spoken word, to artists that were from the Americas, from the continent of Africa, folks that, I mean it was a diverse group of folks. Professionally trained artists as well as self-taught artists like myself. Men and women, gay, straight, it was inclusive, the community.

One of the things that I really admired about each artist is that their calling to this work, it was either as a result of their own healing journey and/or a family member, or work that they have done previously, and this deep sense of giving back. That is at the core of being an artist-in-residence is understanding that your gift is not just for you, it's for others. And how can I be of service to others?

The other thing about the artist-in-residence program that Shanti and Scott Stoner, and all the other folks that have been involved in it, made sure that the artists were compensated. For their work. That included work that was in the hospital, when workshops were requested, payment for that, and that's important because that affirms and values the artists. I still would do the work no matter what but there's an added bonus when you are being compensated to do what you love.

It really does bring a lot of respect to the program because the hospital's understand that. That is a key piece and there's a seriousness of it when you work in the hospital setting.

**Casey:** On the ground, the AIR program, what does that look like?

**Kiamsha:** A typical Sunday for me, or a Saturday, you walk into the hospital at Walter Reed. I just want to say there are varying levels of security and so because of that you've gotta make sure that you follow the administrative procedures of whatever hospital it is. When you deal with a military hospital there are two IDS and you've gotta get them updated every there. So that's just a side piece, it's not that just walk in, you gotta deal with some administrative pieces and you've got to follow the rules of whatever that institution is. So you need to be clear about that because if you forget your badge you can't get in. You're coming into a hospital setting, you walk into the hospital, you go the floor, the first stop is at the nurse's center. So you're looking for the charge nurse, the head person in charge, and you're asking...a lot of times you're educating people because there may be a change of staff and then the shifts so you introduce yourself, give the little spiel about Smith Center, how long we've been in the hospital, and then you start to find out what patients and/or family members may be interested.

A lot of times the staff may or may not know so what I try to is, "Is there anybody here that you know is creative, bored, angry, hasn't had a visitor, may have children in the room, may

have had family members here for long periods of time? Um, are they, do they speak another language? Do they have a special gift, I call that like the disability, some people may not be able to use their hands. So I give a range of ideas, like scenarios, and if some people will kinda look at you like staring out into space like they still don't get it, I explain well, is there anybody you think needs to move their fingers?

Because there are different things we can do with like clay. Is there anybody with a traumatic brain injury? Painting helps. Anybody that's in an extreme amount of pain? I know once a month I go to the fifth floor and that's the oncology unit and work with cancer patients and their families and friends. I had the honor and pleasure to work with a number of people who've made their transition. But having that capacity to work with them each month for almost a year, if not longer, that allows you to see how it supports them in their process. Because a lot of times you find that there are some tremendous artists...and the stories in the past year I think I've worked with 70 and up military folks and especially women. Their stories, you gotta imagine, when they joined the military 50 years ago it was a completely different experience and what drove them to do that. You get all this information from the charge nurse and you knock on the door, sometimes it's kinda hard to get people to open up, so I begin with an icebreaker.

If there are people in the room I say, "So I have this thing called a 6-word memoir," which you've seen, that's why you see that a lot because that's my icebreaker. I say, "Can you describe this person in 6 words?" And it's a game in some respects and then also if the person is just by themselves I'm able to get them to talk. If I say so can you give me a six word memoir about how you're feeling in the present moment?

And it could be really rough feelings. Depending on what they say, most people after you get them to say one or two words they start telling you stories. Or I'll say, well you mentioned that it was frustrating, what is it frustrating about?

And then, well how do you manage that? People will say oh well I'm using adult coloring books or I'll open say, "Well it sound like you might want to try some painting." So those kind of conversations, those stories allow me to slip in and give an invitation, cause you've gotta give an invitation. The other thing too is you've gotta give people choices because not everybody is interested.

So one of the things after I do my spiel, a lot of people are super polite, especially in the military, they won't tell you to get out. You know, they'll just kinda look at you like...you need to get out. So what I always offer after I share what Smith Center is about and what I have and stressing the fact that it's free of charge and that you have the opportunity to tell me no, I'm not interested.

I always say, it won't hurt my feelings, I've been trained significantly in how to take a no and you can go about doing whatever it is that you want to do. It's ok to say no and that, I think, relaxes people. Because for me, before I even step into the room, before I even get to the floor, I do a surrender prayer so that all my stuff, whatever my stuff is going on in my life, and my ego, I can put that on pause and just really get into the mindset that I'm here to serve and that whatever I'm supposed to get from this experience I will get and whatever I'm supposed to be I will be.

To just be open to that, because I can't come in with a pre, I don't have a plan. If you asked me, "Oh, so how many people are you trying to see on Sunday?"...I don't know. My thing is to show up and be open and receptive.

And sometimes, people just need someone to listen. That's it. And they'll do art if you listen with them, or they might share, like there was a gentleman that I worked with on Sunday, and he was a biblical scholar, he traveled, he did all kinds of things but within our time together he was able to - I'd ask him about a 6-word memoir he said, I just can't give you six words. But at the end I said, but you did. When you explained what you wore around your neck, the artwork that you had created, you said you weren't an artist but yet still...

**Casey:** So do you primarily work with the cancer patients at Walter Reed or is it within the whole hospital?

**Kiamsha:** No, so we started at Walter Reed in 2010. We started with the wounded warriors, and that was a very different population because Smith Center before that, from 2001-2009, had contracts with the Washington Hospital Center, Holy Cross and Howard, we started in 2003, which is where I served to 2009. So this was a totally different population because mostly we were dealing with young men, like people who are 25 and younger.

I mean, you're getting 18 year olds, 19 year olds, and the population that we were dealing with were people who lost limbs, and/or traumatic brain injuries, I mean and it was more than just one limb. It was like the first month, the first month I would email Shanti and say I don't know if I'm gonna be able to do this...because you can't show the shock when you walk in on your face and I would find out, you get, one of the things you get at the nurse's station, you do get a description of what's happening with the patient and they'll tell you like, the patient has been depressed or the patient is on suicide watch, which is why they want you to go in so that they, so that you can do one-on-one work which has been amazing.

Some of the most dynamic people have been on suicide watch. Like, multi-talented artists. Playing guitar, writing music, painting, you know just all this stuff. Just incredible. So, you're working with these young guys that are in the military and many were marines, you know, hard core navy, and I was just terrified but they really helped me get over myself. You know? Their spirit and their resiliency and their um, their "I'm gonna make it out of this" attitude.

And then their creativity, like there are so many that that wanted to do painting and to draw and also to force me to, all of us, we had to find things that people could put together. They really were hands on and I remember one of the artists she had, Linda, she had them creating houses with the tooth picks, not the tooth picks but the popsicle sticks. And then I brought in wire sculptures because I'm a wire sculptor, and with coat hangers and wire, or just found objects like yarn, knit anything, but it had to be sturdy.

You know, so it was, that forced me to go in a different direction with what I offered. So, the cancer patients that we work with, we started um, I think was two or three years ago, just going up once a month to the fifth floor. That's the traditional Smith Center approach, of working with cancer patients. I use the same traditional Smith Center approach with

Wounded Warriors but it was just a different experience because of the traumatic brain injury and you know, it was different.

**Casey:** So can you share a bit about the cancer patient experience?

**Kiamsha:** I'm gonna take you back to Howard. Even to now, because that's how I came here. My grandmothers both had cancer but my father's mother, she died of breast cancer, and she's the reason why I do this work. One of the things that she encouraged me to do is my art and how powerful it was. So in her memory I do this work, for Frederica Stanley Roberts Leeke. Working with people living with cancer is probably one of the best ways for me to learn how to appreciate my life and how short life can be.

I think some of the biggest things that I've witnessed with the power of this program with cancer patients is how art in its many forms can help people refocus their energies especially when they're in an extreme amount of pain that they cannot escape. Or that their life has significantly changed very quickly. Also, saying goodbye to their life. I've had the privilege of working with people who have decided no more chemo, that have been told you only have a week left, and preparing their room for them to transition so that their family, their children, you know, when they leave, that they'll have something and to have art as a way to be that bridge and to help them express it.

And also the anger, let's be real, like for people to express their anger of whatever has come up. Anger at themselves, anger at life, anger at family members, friends and also for people to share their truth. Lots of people share things they won't share with their family members or their friends.

They get it out. Or they're discovering new parts of themselves. It's a powerful thing to watch someone who never painted. Never painted...realize how much joy it brings and how it just chills them out. How they're like, "Honey you need to go to CVS and get me some paints!"

Or people who are realizing that as a kid they loved to color and never thought about the adult coloring books, kinda foo fooed them away but realized that, this really was relaxing. Or, you know, just making things for other people. I mean, I've met a number of folks who just want to express their gratitude to people and making cards for like, every week, just making cards for people like, they had a list, like this is who we're making cards for this week.

Or just folks realizing that every person is creative, even if you don't have the desire to pick up a pen and tell a story or make a piece of art. One woman was just, she was an interior designer, she should be an interior decorator. She showed me pictures of her home and she changes her home based on the season. The themes, and every five years she switches it based on continents that she loves. And I was like, "You don't think you're creative..?"

Or cooking and putting the food together that really, the power of working with people living with cancer has been helping them celebrate and see that they are in fact creative. And that their creativity matters. Working with a woman at Walter Reed her husband was honored to

write her story and he said I'm just gonna leave you all for the next hour he said, please get her to write.

I sat with her and asked, "Why aren't you writing?" That's where we started. I said, "Why don't we just journal, you know, do prompts on why you aren't writing. You don't have to share it with me unless you want to."

She wrote that the cancer got in the way. Then she wrote that she has more time now to write but she won't write. The cancer actually, and then she started to laugh, she said "The cancer actually gave me the opportunity to write but I don't want to write, does that sound crazy?"

I said, "No, it just sounds like you're discovering yourself." But to be able to see the ah ha lightbulb go off for folks that is um, that's powerful. And to also um, there's a woman at Walter Reed she was uh, military, I think she was a pediatric nurse and she found, the Sunday that I went and worked with her she had just been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer.

She was crying, and we did we some six word memoirs. She was really just, she said, I don't know how I'm gonna tell people that I'm not gonna have the chemo because I'm just not gonna do that to my body. We did a series of six word memoirs about that and it got down to the place where she was in a calmer state, not that I'm a psychologist or anything, and I asked her, "So what is your biggest fear?"

Let's write that. The biggest fear was that her animals wouldn't be taken care of. So we started writing 6 word memoirs about the animals and celebrating them. Then we created a collage for her. She had cat children and she had dog children. She hugged me at the end and she said I don't know what I'm going to do as far as telling people but I do feel a calmer sense here and I know that before I leave I want to make sure that my pet children are taken care of, and that's my focus now.

She died shortly after that. Which is not an easy thing to take but as you do this work you realize the cycles of life and for me, I'm grateful that I was able to be present at that time. And to see her, that's it. Cause we're all gonna go and to see, the other thing too working with cancer patients is you see the grace that people bring both their loved ones and them and how they interact with each other.

There was a Jewish couple that I work with and he was in the military and they had traveled together and she was a teacher but she came from a really rich background where her father worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement and she grew up knowing the King children. She had so many stories and her husband, and she was in a lot of pain, and so she was telling these stories as she was coloring, doing the adult coloring books.

And her husband and I wrote 6-word memoirs about her stories. She just, she said, you know, "I didn't think about the pain." We were all here together doing art and we made a collage and she was just in her zone. She had never done the adult coloring books before, that was one of those times and she just said, she said you know what you need to do, and he was like "Yeah! Adult coloring books, I'm on it."

So it was one of those things and he thanked me, he said, it was an outside person coming in and the work that you do is important because for this time, we lost track of time I forget how long I was in there cause I was in there for a long time, cause she colored a number of things...and we went from the 6 word memoirs to the collage but he said that the work that you do and the work that Smith Center does it helps relieve us of the stress. Because he said, "When she's stressed, I'm stressed. When she's relaxed, I'm relaxed. You gave us a new way of navigating it."

A lot of times you don't know what the impact is because that's the down side of it because you come in and you may not see the people again so you don't, unless you've seen them in the streets some place, and they tell you, you can't violate that because of HIPPA but you really, you gotta like move on to the next person so you don't know what happened.

That's my thing, I always wonder, at Walter Reed these people are from all over the country it's not like at Howard where I would see people...I would see folks because you just see people. And plus people return back to that hospital so the likelihood of seeing them again is stronger. I don't know if those stories helped...

**Casey:** No, they do. This is awesome, you've given me a lot. My next question was, "Do you have specific stories?" but you've shared some specific stories so no, that's great. You mentioned you give you spiel about Smith Center and AIR, so let's say if someone is just being introduced to us and AIR, what would you want them to know about your work and our work?

**Kiamsha:** So, I would say that Smith Center for over 20 years has been a vehicle that it offers you and opportunity to explore yourself, and your gifts. To tell your story. In any way you want to tell it, if you want to tell it in anger...because I've had people who've been like "I'm pissed! This is not fair!" I was like say it, get it out! Like let's say it!

Or children, of patients that the parents have said, "Please, please go in the staff lounge and do some art with our kids because they need it." And they won't talk but they'll do the art, they'll sit there and they'll do the art. Then I'll say, "Hey...what's this about?"

Or they just needed to be with somebody completely different. So it, it gives people both the patient and the family member, and I don't want to forget the staff because I've worked with staff too. And staff need it as well, and staff want to get involved too, they take time. They see how much fun it is so they're stressed, and it gives everybody a chance to pause for a moment and to, I like to call it mindful creativity. Connect with something outside of the cancer itself. For a moment they're not a cancer patient, nothing wrong with that, but for a moment while they're doing that art they're not a cancer patient. They are whoever they are or who they want to be. I'm not saying that they're artists and we're magically making all of these artists but it helps them step outside of that. Or helps them step outside and step back in. With a deeper sense of connection. I can say that, they have a deeper sense of connection or they learn things that allow them to connect deeply with their loved ones or their family members or their friends because to have people express how they feel about you in six words, you know to have a whole room of folks talking about, "you inspire me," you know, it can be tear-jerking, it can be laughter, it can be people saying, "you know what you really are crazy!"

In a good sense, but you know you're crazy like they'll have "strong, peaceful, wacky, aggressive, and bossy." It's the combination of words, then I ask them, "What's the bossy about?"

And then everybody has a little story but it brings people together too, it creates a community. It also lets the staff know who's in this room. Not just a patient. They get to see, cause we put the art on the walls, and the one thing about Walter Reed is you can put the art on the wall and nobody's gonna get upset about it. They actually want you to put things, they encourage you to put things up. It also helps give the patient and the family if they're gonna be there for a while, it makes their space theirs.

It helps it to be sacred. Like, I created like an artist studio with a woman, she's since made her transition but we worked together for a year. She was only in the hospital once a month but every month I was there we created her whole room she said we have to re-create it. To put up different things that she's created like this is her gallery.

To really be there, and to be present. So you're giving them space. I feel like Smith Center holds space for people. Healing space so without any agenda the only agenda is to hold space and for people to be held and to know that it's safe space, that's the greatest gift you can give anybody but in particular somebody does, and their family, and the staff because that work is taxing. To hold space with creativity, uhh! That is awesome!

That is awesome, yeah, that's awesome.

**Casey:** Agreed. Were there any last thoughts?



**Kiamsha:** I will say this too, one of the things I've done over the years because I'm blessed to be a part of this community, because I wouldn't be...this is something I didn't share, this is huge. So when I started at Smith Center in 2001 I was terrified of hospitals and I don't think a lot of people know. And I stayed on for two years without going into a hospital because I was deathly afraid of hospitals because my experience was when you go, somebody dies.

When we got the contract for Howard, I had done all the trainings, I had done them twice over.

Been to all the artist meetings. When we got the contract for Howard in 2003, they put an ultimatum. You either go or you can't do this cause you gotta go in. And I was scheduled to have surgery that year so I was like, I'm gonna do this to get ready to go in for mine.

I was like I can do this for six months. And if it doesn't work out then at least my surgery is done and I can move on. Well that six months turned into 15 years.

In that 15 year span of time the skill set that I walked in with as a poet, as a visual artist who only used wire sculpture, coat hangers, I walked out a painter.

So I'm a painter, I'm also, I fell in love with collage because of folks there. I learned how to make my wire sculptures of women more life-like because of this master artist. My yoga teaching as a result of being here, of going to yogaville and having the mind, body, spirit connection here and having the access to it.

I was able to figure out and really step into my own calling as a yoga teacher. The same with Reiki. Some of my best reiki experiences came from artists who were here who gave me reiki before I went in and during my surgery.

I witnessed the power of it. The same with what I'm doing now as mindfulness facilitator trainee in the program that I'm in. All of who I am is directly resulted to Smith Center and the experiences that I've had. So it's not, when I think about, Oh I show up on Sundays...I get so much more than what I feel like I give back so I could never not give. There's always more to give to Smith Center.

Smith Center has meant so much to me because it has allowed me to honor my grandmother but it has transformed my life and my calling. And helping me see myself in a bigger, better more creative space. It's given me an opportunity to um, to talk about the work, to be a part of the academic process of it with the society for Arts and Health care.