ON JUNE 20, 2011, Mount Sinai became the first hospital in Manhattan with a palliative care inpatient unit. Located on the sixth floor of the Klin- genstein Pavilion, with sweeping views of Central Park, the Wiener Family Palliative Care Unit features eight private patient rooms and two patient rooms for more extensive monitoring.

"Mount Sinai has been a pioneer in palliative care since the Hertzberg Institute was established, so it’s only fitting that we should be the first to have an inpatient unit," says Palliative Care Unit Medical Director Gabrielle Goldberg, MD.

Designed as a place where patients and families can be together, the unit offers extensive facilities, including a kitchen, bathroom, lounge and sleeper chairs, which allow families to spend unlimited time with their loved one. "Families are among the most important clients we need to serve," says Hertzberg Palliative Care Institute Director Diane E. Meier, MD. "Unlike regular hospital units that have limited access, we invite families in."

The unit was the culmination of years of advocacy and planning. Once Mount Sinai allocated space in 2008 and major funding was provided by the Wiener family (see article on page 2), Hertzberg Institute staff could begin the design process and raise additional funds.

The architectural firm that designed the unit, Perkins Eastman, helped the Institute choose colors that complemented the decor. "We wanted colors like blues and creams that remind people of peaceful places like the beach," says Dr. Goldberg, who, together with Hertzberg Institute Medical Director Emily J. Chai, MD, and Nurse Practitioner Jay Horton, handled the nuts-and-bolts aspects of creating the new unit.

Since it opened, the unit has cared for over 115 patients ranging in age from their 20s to their 90s, with conditions such as cancer and stroke. "Two patients described the unit as a ‘blessed place,’” says Dr. Goldberg. “Families are very happy to have a place that is welcoming to them and where they feel confident about the attention and care their loved one is receiving.”
The Wiener Family Palliative Care Unit: A DREAM REALIZED

This year, we achieved our dream to establish an inpatient unit for palliative care. With the opening of the Wiener Family Palliative Care Inpatient Unit in June, we now have a peaceful and supportive environment for seriously ill patients and their families to heal together.

As the demand increased for our consulting services across Mount Sinai Hospital, we realized that seriously ill patients needed a place that could provide the highly skilled and specialized care that palliative care teams deliver. We are grateful that Mount Sinai appreciated this need and allocated space for the first palliative care inpatient unit in Manhattan.

Palliative care patients have illnesses that are not easy to treat. They may have symptoms, such as pain, fatigue and depression, which are difficult to control. Some of our patients have been hospitalized for a long time because there is nowhere else that can safely care for them and meet their needs.

In just a short time, the inpatient unit has made a difference not only for patients and families but also for Mount Sinai medical staff and hospital operations. I’ve seen patients and families relax when they come to our unit and happiness returns to their faces. Away from the pressures of regular hospital units, patients and families get the chance they need to consult with our clinical staff and together develop a plan to meet their needs in the community.

I’ve been amazed at the response from Mount Sinai medical staff in all specialties. Caring for chronically ill patients in general hospital units is very stressful for physicians, nurses and social workers. They love the Palliative Care Unit because they see how beneficial it is, helping patients heal, supporting exhausted families, and providing dedicated and intensive medical care to the sickest and most vulnerable patients.

Mount Sinai Hospital leaders are also pleased with the positive impact of the Palliative Care Unit on the whole hospital. It has enabled the hospital to function more efficiently and effectively, freeing up space and staff in the overcrowded Emergency Department, intensive care units, and medical/surgical units.

Based on what I’ve observed, I think our Palliative Care Unit should be a model for other hospital units: we welcome families; we are staffed to meet the complex needs—physical, emotional, spiritual—of our patients and families. I am especially proud to point to our higher nurse-to-patient ratio, which studies show is directly correlated with better patient outcomes. We hope to be pioneers in the redesign of hospitals so all patients and their families receive quality, compassionate care.

“I’ve seen patients and families relax when they come to our unit and happiness returns to their faces.”

DIANE E. MEIER MD
Director, Hertzberg Palliative Care Institute

Colorful Watercolors by Noted Artist Brighten Unit Environment

When visitors enter the Wiener Family Palliative Care Unit, they are greeted by a series of brightly colored paintings. These abstract watercolors were painted by noted New York artist Cliff Enright, whose work has graced the walls of many museums and galleries, including the Smithsonian Institution and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.

All the paintings are recent works, created since Enright suffered a spinal cord injury in 2003 and became a quadriplegic. “I paint more now than before my injury,” says Enright, who invented a method that has enabled him to continue painting. With the assistance of aides, Enright applies layers of white masking fluid and watercolor paints, later removing the mask to create vivid colors.

Enright’s work was selected for the unit through his association with The Creative Center: Arts in Healthcare, a New York organization that promotes healing through art, offering free classes to people with chronic illnesses and sponsoring an artists-in-residence program at area hospitals, including Mount Sinai. Mount Sinai artist-in-residence Desi Minchillo offers an art program for Mount Sinai cancer patients and leads workshops for Mount Sinai medical staff.

Creative Center Director Robin Glazer learned about Enright, a patient at the Mount Sinai Department of Rehabilitation Medicine, from a Mount Sinai physician. “Cliff is a very active artist. He is a close and careful observer of life and that didn’t change with his disability,” says Glazer.

Glazer helped Unit Medical Director Gabrielle Goldberg select artworks for the unit from The Creative Center’s gallery of works by artists who have disabilities or work in healthcare. “Cliff uses colors reflective of nature; his work is both uplifting and contemplative. It complements the unit, which is beautiful and soothing,” says Glazer.

“Palliative care is about celebrating life in the midst of chronic disease. Enright’s paintings, with their vibrant colors, help convey that message,” says Jim Palmer, LCSW, a palliative care social worker.

Enright is pleased to have his work on display at the unit. “It makes me happy to bring happiness to others,” he says.