



Art and science vied for Sarah Young's heart: Both found a place

Description

Few who end up in the hospital are likely to be thinking about whether there's a sufficient, readily accessible, and safe supply of blood on hand if needed. Someone who has is Sarah Young, former manager of the blood bank at San Francisco's Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

Until she retired in 2017, it was her preoccupation for some 34 years. Now her center of attention is on art, a household staple growing up, with parents involved in art and music. She has worked in pencil and ink pen, linoleum block cutting and watercolor.



Sarah Young, a former blood bank manager, has been able to focus in retirement on her lifelong love of art. Here she shows one of her monoprints. (All photos by Colin Campbell)

At 73 and many years after retirement, Young is still fascinated with immunology and blood banking. She keeps abreast of innovations and technologies through close associations, journals, and other reading materials.

Blood banking in her blood

“I like the logic of figuring out a good way to do things. We used to have drills in emergency situations on how fast our blood bankers could issue O-negative blood, which can be transfused to patients with any blood type. One real-life example is when a patient is losing a lot of blood quickly. We drilled for seamless transitions to handle any kind or amount of bleeding at any time.”

“In spite of years of research, there is no safe, dependable substitute to human blood,” she noted.

When Young came on board the VA, blood banking technology was evolving. The process of typing blood and detecting abnormal blood cells was done manually and recorded in hand-written reports entered into a word processor.

“The biggest change in the blood bank in my time was in computerizing the patient results and history, the donor blood supply, and having barcode scanners to read the information that we began to put onto all the patient blood specimens,” she said.

“The computers gave us more speed,” she said, “but most of all it protected patients by preventing clinicians from choosing the wrong blood type in a rush situation, or using a [Type and Screen specimen](#) that is too old – after three days – or an expired unit of blood.”

Blood banking never got old for her even though it took her 21 years to reach the position of manager. She started in 1983, working evenings and nights as what she called a “lowly bench tech.” She ran blood tests, recorded the data, and then made reports. Eventually, she moved up to the dayshift, working full-time testing blood chemistry, and became a blood bank specialist, skilled in all aspects and able to teach. She was named manager in 2004.

She particularly liked teaching, especially at San Francisco State University’s yearlong “clinical laboratory scientist” program, offered to only two students each year. Over the years, she has received awards for teaching, from the University of California-San Francisco, and blood bank management.

She also liked writing up procedures for the staff.

“I think they [my subordinates, medical technologists] appreciated that the procedures were all there for them to look up anything and that they could call me at night to ask for advice when they were panicking. I tried to make it so they could avoid panic, feel confident.”

Change of heart



Young with what she calls one of her “reductive lino-cuts.” In Winter Lotus, she used five layers of color, printing from a linoleum block.

In high school, Young wanted to study art, literature, and languages. Art and music were part of the air she breathed growing up in Denver, Colorado, the oldest of four siblings. Her father was a music and arts critic; her mother studied economics and art in college and earned income from drawing ads. She also illustrated the covers for an arts magazine her father produced for two years.

But everything changed in college, where she grew enamored of the sciences.

“I took an Intro to Biology at Arizona State University that aroused my curiosity,” she said. “I switched and took a lot of courses in ecology and botany. Later I took biochemistry.”

Once she earned a degree in biology, she wasn’t sure how it was going to make her a living until her then-father-in-law suggested medical technology. By taking only a few more classes, she got into a yearlong program in Medical Technology at Arizona University in Tempe.

After holding three different medical tech jobs at different hospitals in Phoenix, she moved to San Francisco in 1984, finding her niche at the VA Hospital. While working her day job, she took one or two classes each semester at the California College of Arts and Crafts, now the California College of the Arts.



The Chinese brush painting behind her on the right behind her was done by her husband, Earl.

It was in a Japanese paper-making class that she met Earl, who became her second husband in 1989. He is also an artist, currently working in ceramics and was an art teacher for 39 years. They both lived in Oakland for a while, and by 1992 they were able to buy a home in San Francisco.

Art and community

Without children â??â?? â??Earl always said heâ??d had so many hundreds of children at school that he didnâ??t want to come home to childrenâ??• â?? Young and her husband have devoted much of their time to neighborhood and political activism.

She recently hosted a house party for a District 5 supervisorial candidate. For the national election, sheâ??s writing and sending informational postcards to citizens throughout the United States.

They were on the board of the Hayes Valley neighborhood association for about two years when Young was asked to become treasurer, which she called a â??fun and a good learning experience.â?• She is still a member at large.

As a couple, they enjoy connecting with other volunteers, every Friday, at the neighborhood food bank, which is at a church in Hayes Valley.

As for her early love â?? art, sheâ??s still going strong. At a solo show of her watercolors in March 2024 at the Hayes Valley Art Works, she sold three of 16 pieces.

â??I love carrying my sketchbook and doing drawings around San Francisco or when I travel. Sometimes I like to take more time to do a watercolor from a photo in my basement studio,â?• she said. â??Iâ??m especially attracted to images with sun and shadow and reflection in water.â?•

Young and her husband also collect art, mostly by their friends, and have enjoyed going to flea markets for treasures while traveling.

â??We have a lot of stuff now,â?• she said. â??I am more interested in finding new homes for the stuff.â?•

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