

Hospital of Emotions



When I stepped off the elevator on the 6th floor of the old St. Vincent's Hospital in Los Angeles, it wasn't a functioning hospital anymore. The site had temporarily been transformed into four floors of an immersive art exhibition called Hospital of Emotions. Lacking were the ambient sounds of a hospital—beeping IV pumps, clanging food trays, overhead pages. Lacking were the usual smells—antiseptic, disease, filtered air. All this was replaced by an artistic audio landscape and the smell of fresh paint and craft glue.

But as I turned to the right after exiting the elevator, I was immediately taken back nearly twenty years when I stood in that same windowed corridor that overlooks LA's West 3rd Street and the old House Ear Institute office tower. It was the site where I stood calling grandparents and aunts and uncles to let them know that my 4-year-old son had made it safely through complex ear surgery to remove a large benign tumor that began in his middle ear space but had eroded through the boney plate at the base of the brain. Anatomically, the tumor sat next to the facial nerve—the nerve that controls facial expression.

The nerve that controlled his beautiful smile.

During surgery, a technician continuously monitored the integrity of the facial nerve. The surgeon later told me that when he got into the bulk of the tumor, he had been concerned that it was a more ominous sarcoma—an aggressive and often fatal cancerous growth—because of the tumor's size and consistency.

This surgery was followed by two others over a several year period. I lost count of how many times we made the trips for follow-up appointments and check-ups in the years after all of that.

At Hospital of Emotions, the abandoned rooms became a living museum of vulnerability, memory, healing, and loss. Hospitals are repositories not only of physical suffering but of human feeling itself. The place once dedicated to healing the body had become a landscape for examining inner life.

The exhibit explored grief, hope, fear, joy, love, and resilience. Standing in that sixth-floor corridor, I realized I didn't need the installation to show me those emotions. I had lived them there already.

I was standing at ground zero of my own hospital of emotions.

Just twenty-four hours earlier, I had watched that same little boy walk into his own corridor to board a plane and move across the country to begin his adult life. I realized joy and heartbreak can feel the same.

Years ago, I had stood in a hospital corridor desperately wanting my son to come back to me—alive, healthy, and still wearing that beautiful smile.

Now I was learning to let him go.

The Hospital of Emotions exhibit will close after two months. The fresh paint, soundtrack, and craft glue will fade away.

But part of that space will never close for me.

It will always be the place where I feared my son might lose his smile—and where, twenty years later, I understood he was carrying that smile across the country.

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