

At Methodist Hospital, there's a special place for artists to heal

KYRIE O'CONNOR
Commentary



Dr. Evan Collins is, by any measure, a great hand surgeon. He is, after all, chief of the Hand and Upper Extremity Center at Houston Methodist Hospital. But if you spend any time walking the halls of Methodist, in the Oz-like Texas Medical Center, you'll see he's also one of the most cheerful and friendly guys you'll ever meet.

He says hi to everyone. Everyone says hi to him. Sometimes, hugs are involved.

But his big personality is not what Evan, a New York native whose accent has not been eroded by more than half a decade among honey-voiced Texans, wants to discuss.

He wants to talk about his work with the Center for Performing Arts Medicine at Methodist, founded by Dr. Richard Stasney, where Evan recently became vice chairman. The center, he says, "is really a form of giving back as legacy. There's no center quite the same in any other part of the country.

It all began a few years ago when Dr. Stasney called Evan and asked him if he'd treat a

pianist with a wrist problem. He said yes. "He cared so much about the patient that he called directly," says Evan. He was so impressed that he kept on working with the center.

The center treats singers, musicians, dancers, actors and others who suffer disease or injury related to their callings. "We're not only taking care of people but also do research to improve their quality of care," he says.

Orthopedists are used to dealing with elite athletes—young, active people at the peak of their performing lives. Artists are a different story. Athletes train, practice and perform. Musicians, for example, don't train. They just practice and perform. Are they concerned with working out or nutrition? Chances are they're not.

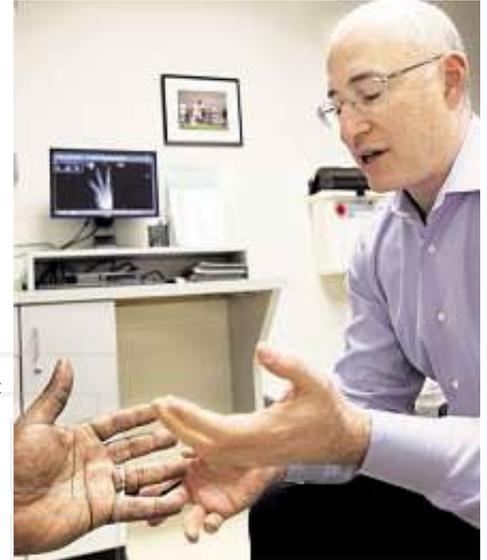
Athletes are the exceptions, really: They're fit, and they're in their 20s and 30s. Like the rich, they're different from you and me.

Musicians aren't. Like us, they have to perform through their 40s, 50s and 60s. And like us, even if they get hurt, they have to go back to work and perform the same functions that got them injured in the first place. "Musicians develop problems at an earlier age and frequency," Evan says, "and then they go back to the work that created them."

The artists have capacity problems, he says, and he and the others involved with the center work to improve

capacity at any age. They work not just with professionals, but with college and even high school students.

Evan is proud of the center's patient-centric ethic, in which the professionals work together to find the best solution for each unique case. "We have a consistency of protocols, with nuance for each patient," he says.



J. Patric Schneider

Dr. Evan Collins, a hand specialist, works with a patient at the Center for the Performing Arts Medicine at Methodist Hospital

O'Connor: Center treats musicians, artists, dancers, actors

Working with the artists has taken Evan out of the comparatively narrow field of orthopedic surgery and allowed him to work with professionals whose training is outside surgery.

Evan believes in the arts. But even from a medical perspective, music can, for example, connect a stroke patient back to the world or engage an unengaged child. It's a little like medicine that way.

As if a medical degree weren't enough, Evan just earned his M.B.A. at Rice. Part of the impetus was his natural desire to learn, but he also believes it will help him communicate better and understand organizations. "It's a great tool if you want to be effective at doing the right thing," Evan says. "Especially at a school like Rice, they give

you the tools."

He credits his wife, Riva, a dermatologist at Kelsey-Sebold, with holding their active family of three kids together while he studied. They met in med school in 1988. "I'm very fortunate. I married very well," he says with a grin. "I am lucky to have found a kindred spirit."

On the fourth floor at Methodist, there's a brightly painted area for center patients, with therapy tables, a faux basketball court, art on the walls.

"We've got a floor now," Evan says. "We've got a place that's really cool. Doing the right thing isn't hard. We've got ways to create a culture and make it self-sustaining. The future is really bright."

kyrie.oconnor@chron.com