



# Life

THE TUSCALOOSA NEWS



Entertainment

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## Sketches 'n' stories Kentuck hosts Dr. Alan Blum and his patients

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Since he was a resident on rounds sketching a cute social worker, Dr. Alan Blum has put pen to paper to capture faces: grimaces, grins, groans, looks of consternation and sly sharing.

The sketches and poem-like notations of complaints and questions bring vividly back each and every patient... and their stories.

Hundreds of Blum's works are on display starting today at the Kentuck Art Center in downtown Northport.

Saturday he'll read from his notebooks, in a performance piece he calls "the oral equivalent of voyeurism."

"I think I've gotten stories out of people they've never told," Blum said, "stories that need to be told, if it's not too self-serving."

At least one of his patients, a homeless art lover, would agree.

Angelic, seemingly too delicate for street life, the man had been institutionalized at 9, where he was shown how to dress himself and balance his checkbook. But he'd taught himself to read.

"I asked him how he learned to read. He said, 'Vanna White and 'Sesame Street.' He could write as well. 'They say I write like a doctor,'" Blum said.

Whatever money the man could make, rather than saving up for a home, he would spend on opera or ballet tickets, "because he loved to watch the stories."

For Christmas four years ago, the homeless man gave Blum a Degas ballet calendar.


Not all the stories are that sweet. Some are ribald, some sad, some simply weird. Some read like Henny Youngman skits.

Blum once told a woman patient he had

**IF YOU GO**

An opening reception for Dr. Alan Blum's "Seeing Patients: The Sketchiest of Details" will be held from 5-9 tonight in conjunction with Art Night.

Blum will read from his notes in a multi-media performance/gallery talk at 2 p.m. Saturday in the Kentuck Gallery. Admission to Art Night and the Saturday gallery talk is free and open to the public. The Kentuck Art Center is at 503 Main Avenue. For more, call 758-1257.



good news: The medicine he was prescribing would cure her seizures.

"I don't know why that's good news. It's the only exercise I get," Blum recalled.

He asked another: Any problems at home?

"Oh just the usual (expletive) with my kids. One's a dopehead, the other's 17."

One patient described her mammogram thusly: It's like putting your boob down on the driveway and having your boyfriend back his truck over it.

"I asked a lady with Alzheimer's 'Do you know where you are?' She said 'Sure. I think I'm right here.'"

One gentleman suffered a broken heart stemming from his broken body. While flying a crop duster, he collided with another plane. His aorta was sliced, leading to a loss of blood pressure and circulation that left his legs paralyzed.

His new marriage didn't last.

"He said she had told him, 'I'm tired of changing the light bulbs and I want to dance,'" Blum said. Just at that moment, his nurse came in: A light had burned out in the medicine cabinet.

"I looked at him and said, 'Now's your chance.'"

There are many more: The man who was taught to play chess by Alger Hiss. The 100-year-old lady who died of fright he first time she saw a doctor. The lady whose mother was so mean "she could go to the Wal-Mart store and be cussing the courtesy lady."

All these Blum has captured in spare lines cribbed on folders, prescription pads and pieces of scrap paper, sharing space with phone numbers and recipes.

It spun off doodling in science classes.

Blum did take one art class, because he was flunking a philosophy course — on his first test he scored 5 out of 100, the lowest grade the teacher had ever given. The studio art class was the last option open.

"I showed up, there was a naked woman on the table. I said, 'I can do this,'" Blum said.

He'd also once considered journalism as a profession. He knows how to write tight. Some years back, a colleague at the Baylor College of Medicine encouraged him to gather the works for display. Word spread. Since then, Blum has been written up in Literature and Medicine, the Houston Press and the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Whether it's art, diagnostic tool or storytelling is tough to say.

"I have been told nobody knows what to make of what I do," Blum said. "I think the stories are what I'm into."

"I love the dialects, the language. People are here to tell you the stories, and they love telling them. It's like found art."

Kentuck executive director Miah Michaelsen thinks of Blum's collection partly literature, partly medical artifact and a little bit theater. She was struck by how the monologues and sketches recreate little dramas.

"With just a few quick lines, he's able to capture the character of the person," she said.

"They're far more illuminating of some of these people's personalities than a formal portrait or work by a more traditional artist."

"It's also a very intimate and personal sort of work, something he clearly needs to do, as an important part of observing a patient," learning clues to the ailment or treatment by absorbing the person's history.

In the gallery statement, she drew from the Literature and Medicine article: "Patients come

to a physician to be seen, and they probably share the physician's belief in the power of the objective, scientific gaze....we believe that we are in a safe place and hope that, in being seen, we will be healed."

Alan Blum, doctor and artist

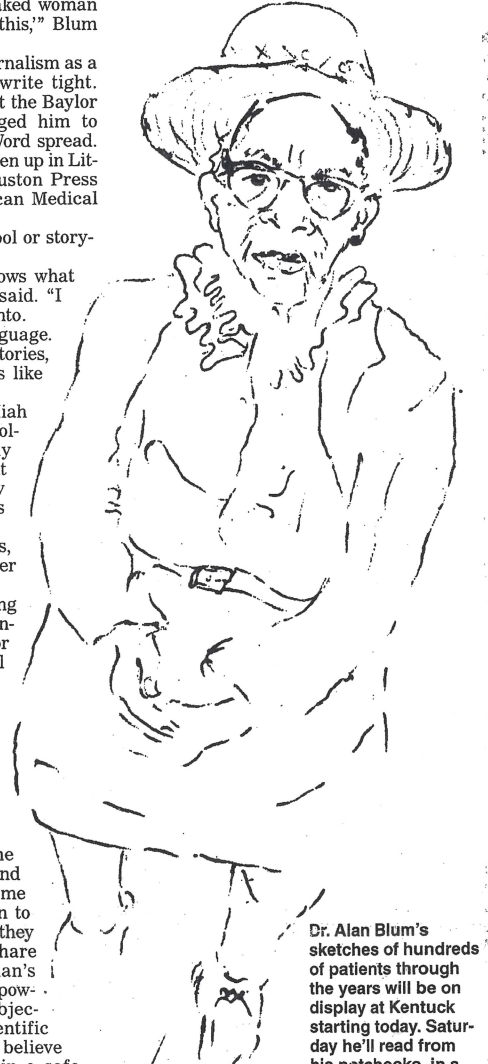
Worried patients would feel violated, Blum initially only displayed sketches of patients who had passed on. Later he thought of case studies in medical journals, where reports are specific, but the patients aren't identified or easily identifiable.

"And (the words) are not exactly as people said them to me," he said. "I'm embellishing slightly."

In all that, it's difficult to imagine anyone being chagrined by Blum's treatment.

"They're very matter of fact. There's no sense that he's poking fun. There is levity, but it arises naturally from the people themselves," Michaelsen said.

Blum has what used to be called "good



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bedside manner." He seems a doctor who really observes, who does more than just hear you: He sees you.

"I've got my little niche in medicine; I'm not as brilliant as some of my colleagues," said Blum, who is a professor at the University of Alabama, holding the Gerald Leon Wallace Chair in Family Medicine.

He's also a passionate anti-smoking crusader. (One of his parodies of cigarette ads: "Emphysema Slims: You Smell from a Long Way, Baby".)

"What I contribute most, I hope, is the process, trying not to overlook the obvious."

"I couldn't manage a patient's ventilator in the ICU, but I'm less likely to miss one of their kids going to jail."

