



OF NOTE

*Devoted to noteworthy happenings
at the medical school*



ALL PHOTOGRAPHY: UPMC

FOOTNOTE

When filmmaker Sarah Polley accepted an Oscar for writing “Women Talking” in March, it was the culmination of a long journey back to health. A concussion she suffered in 2015 had left her with debilitating symptoms for years. Polley credited Pitt Med concussion expert Micky Collins with a treatment plan that allowed her to write and direct her acclaimed fourth feature. And she says the title of her 2022 essay collection, “Run Towards the Danger,” was inspired by Collins’ advice to retrain her brain “by charging toward the very activities that triggered my symptoms.”

Independent thinking

MERCY PAVILION PAIRS VISION AND PHYSICAL REHAB

Take a plate of leftovers out of the refrigerator and pop it into the microwave. Easy? For a person with visual or physical impairments, this everyday act requires a series of movements and skills that can make all the difference between dependence and independence.

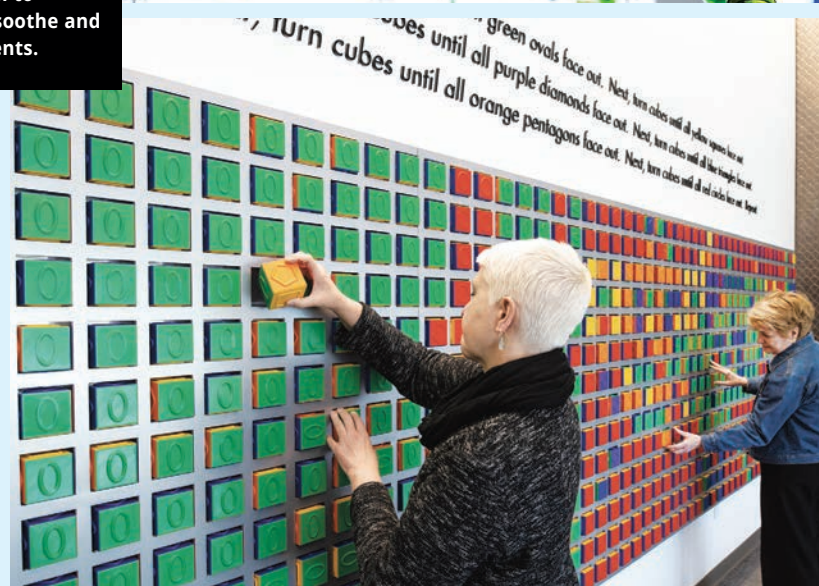
At the new UPMC Mercy Pavilion, which opened for patients May 1 in the Uptown neighborhood of Pittsburgh, a light-filled kitchen in a model apartment overlooking the Monongahela River lets patients practice those skills in a supported setting.

The model apartment is just one among many features in the 410,000-square-foot building moving visual and physical rehabilitation forward. The pavilion’s 109,788 square feet of research space houses University of Pittsburgh scientists pursuing breakthroughs in labs adjacent to clinical spaces. That proximity will help bring research findings directly to patients.

The building serves people “trying to regain their vision, mobility, lives and independence,” says José-Alain Sahel, an MD, Distinguished Professor, Eye and Ear Foundation Professor and chair of the Department of Ophthalmology at Pitt Med, as well as director of the UPMC Vision Institute. (Sahel also led the Institut de la Vision in Paris for many years.) Among other approaches, he is exploring the use of gene therapy as a cure for blindness.



LEFT: Gwendolyn Sowa (right) directs physical therapy in Mercy Pavilion's rehabilitation gym. **RIGHT:** The building's art exhibits, like those by Kipp Kobayashi (top) and Amy Stacey Curtis (middle), aim to encourage, soothe and inspire patients.



John Innocenti, president of UPMC Mercy, calls the rooftop garden a "playground for recovery."

"If you think about the way people navigate their environment when they have visual, mobility or cognitive impairments, there are a lot of similarities in what we need to do in terms of a rehabilitation approach," says Gwendolyn Sowa, an MD, PhD, Endowed Professor and chair of Pitt's Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, as well as director of the UPMC Rehabilitation Institute.

The pavilion also houses Pitt's Rehab Neural Engineering Labs, which focus on decoding and understanding signals from the brain and the peripheral nervous system in ways that can help with mobility, sensory and even visual impairments.

Anantha Shekhar, an MD, PhD, senior vice chancellor for the health sciences and John and Gertrude Petersen Dean of the School of Medicine, says the new research capacity—along with international collaborations—"place Pitt and UPMC at the leading edge of visual and physical rehabilitation medicine worldwide."

The architecture firms HOK and IKM designed the pavilion with input from Chris Downey, one of the world's few blind architects. (Mascaro-Barton Malow was the building's construction manager.) It incorporates a roof garden that John Innocenti, president of UPMC Mercy, calls a "playground for recovery," where patients can practice navigating surfaces like grass, pebbles, steps and cobblestones among fragrant plants like rosemary and sage.

Even the art in the building was chosen to be encouraging, soothing or inspirational, rather than merely decorative. For one installation, patients and staff put notes of inspiration or hope for healing into antique bottles hanging from the ceiling.

"There's a little piece of all of us in them," Sowa says. —*Roberta Zeff*