

# Healing Trees

Site Specific Sculpture at Capital Health, Hopewell NJ

By Kate Graves

The Tree of Life is a concept found in many world mythologies, often presented as a colossal tree which supports the heavens, connecting the heavenly realm to the earth, and through its roots, the underworld. For the art niches at Capital Health, this theme will be customized for each floor, using fabricated and formed steel to create organic forms referencing the medicinal qualities of specific trees.

## Floor 4 - Orthopedic / Neurology

The Ginkgo Biloba is a living fossil, and the extracts from this tree are widely known to have medicinal uses in the improvement of blood flow, protection against oxidative cell damage, and blockage of many of the effects of platelet aggregation (blood clotting) that have been related to central nervous system disorders. The sculpture will feature a stalk with emergent leaves, a branch with the apricot-like seeds and green, fan shaped leaves, and a mature branch with yellow-golden leaves (the tree undergoes a major color change prior to dropping its leaves in the fall). The representation of the annual cycle of the tree subtly enforces the idea of growth, fruition and maturation. (Incidentally, after the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, among the only living things to survive within a five mile radius was a stand of ginkgo trees, which are still living today.)

## Floor 5 - Oncology

Preparations from the European mistletoe (*Viscum album*) are among the most prescribed drugs for cancer patients in several European countries. Proponents claim that extracts of mistletoe stimulate the immune system, improve survival, enhance the quality of life, and reduce adverse effects of chemo- and radio-therapy in cancer patients. The sculpture will feature a grove of Ash trees in the niche, from which branches emerge to form a natural arbor. The arbor may extend at ceiling height out of the niche area to create a canopy in which the mistletoe will be clustered. Though its hemi-parasitic nature suggests the behavior of cancer, mistletoe has been recognized as a keystone species as it provides high quality food and habitat for a broad range of animals worldwide. The tradition of kissing under mistletoe may also add sweetness to this interpretation.

## Floor 6 - Cardiology

There are about 300 species of willow (genus *Salix*), and many have medicinal properties. The active ingredient in aspirin is a synthetic derivative of the willow's salicylic acid, and was known by Native Americans who brewed its bark for its pain relief and fever-reducing properties. In England, a garland of willow was associated with the grieving process to help heal broken hearts. A switch of willow placed in solution with another grafting plant helps to activate growth in that other plant. The sculpture will feature a variety of willow branches, formed and woven together to fill the niche, leaving a central circle open. The open space references the idea of the honorary garland, and also the regenerative circle of birth, life, death and re-birth associated with the Tree of Life.