Local doctor, artist makes connections with neurons

by Pat Somers Cronin

It's hard to believe that the work of a Spanish neuropathologist who won the 1906 Nobel Prize is the reason for a current and fascinating art exhibit at Rockefeller Chapel on the University of Chicago campus, entitled "Neuro-ology: From Christ to Cahuil.

Actually, the real reason is that Dr. Audrius V. Plipolsys, a Beverly resident, pediatric neu- rologist and research neuroscientist, realized that the "landmark studies about the neuronal fine-structure of the human cerebral cortex" published over 100 years ago by Santiago Ramon y Cajal would finally allow him to combine his medical knowledge with his passion for art.

According to Plipolsys, Cajal "discovered the neuronal nature of the brain and defined it," and his reward was the Nobel Prize in physiology and medicine. Plipolsys' reward was superimposing (and aesthetically tweaking) Cajal's drawings of neurons in the human cerebral cortex on outdoor photographs he had already taken.

He then subtracted the background color that he had first added to reveal "deeper layers of underlying memory and underlying artwork." The result was emergent thoughts, emergent words and emergent the-

Pliplolsys

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ology.

This discovery was sheer paradise—and much hard work—for a doctor who had planned on being a nuclear physicist when he began his undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago. Two biology courses were required and strongly protested by Audrius—call him "Andy"—but he finally signed on for a general biology course.

As so often happens, the "very entertaining professor" led off the second quarter with a discussion of the central nervous system, and Plipolsys, wondering "how the brain works and how nerve cells connect to one another to produce sensations, motor functions and dreams," changed his major to pre-med and ended up by medical school to study neurology.

At this point, we have to go back, just briefly, to Plipolsys' childhood in Toronto, Canada, where he was born to immigrant parents from Lithuania.

They kept planning to return; but somehow it never happened, and Andy was raised "in a totally Lithuanian house-

field outside was to be shunned.

When I started attending school, I did not speak a word of English. I vividly remember that first day of school, the total sense of bewilderment and the flood of tears that I pro-

duced.

"My childhood was one of displacement. I lived and went to school in Toronto, but in my house, I was in another coun-

try, in another time period. I belonged to neither place. Not being attached to a location provided the opportunity for abstract thought to grow and develop. Perhaps it is not surprising that I have interests in theoretical pursuits such as physics, neurobiology and concep-
tual art."

He had been introduced to painting by a elementary school friend, a talent he would always treasure and continue to develop.

The family came to Chicago when Plipolsys was a teenager, and he attended St. Rita High School, graduating in 1968 as class valedictorian. From there, it was on to the University of Chicago where he fin-
ished medical school in 1975. He then did an internal medi-

cine internship at the University of Wisconsin.

He also found that living in the city "enjoys "gardening, restoring vintage cars, racing Porsches, coin collecting, gathering Civil War mementos and searching for 200-million-year-old fossils in rural Illinois."

On a personal note, I can add that the doctor relishes cut-

ting his own large lawn, since he lives around the corner from me with his lovely wife, Maria, a child psychiatrist, and two daughters, Mild and Auroine, who is a freshman at St. Ignatius College Prep.

Finally, I cannot resist a quote from the Gospel of Thomas and used in the "Neuro-ology" exhibit catalogue reinforces the spiritual con-

tent of Plipolsys' work: "Jesus said, 'If the flesh came into being because of spirit, that is a first and an important step because it would be identified as a deep and transforming experience for the patient."

"Lithuania is the country of

origin of my parents, in whose culture I was raised. Canada is the country of my birth, the orderly, polite and peaceful nature of which is part of my soul. America is the country in which I work and live, the country that provides the greatest opportunities for those who are willing to work and assert themselves. All of these coun-

tries are truly dear to me. I am a part of all of them, and they are a part of me."

A quote taken from the Gospel of Thomas and used in the "Neuro-ology" exhibit catalogue reinforces the spiritual con-

tent of Plipolsys' work: "Jesus said, 'If the flesh came into being because of spirit, that is a marvel, but if spirit came into being because of the body, that is a marvel of marvelous.'"

The exhibit continues at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, 5850 S. Woodlawn Ave., until Oct. 28, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. For information, call (773) 702-2100.

Also until Oct. 28, "Thinking and the Thought Process: A 25-Year Retrospective Art Exhibit" continues at the Bar-

zakas Museum of Lithuanian Culture, 6500 S. Pulaski Road. Call (773) 852-2500 for information.

A third exhibit on Mark Shale's third and fourth floors, 900 N. Michigan Ave., also continues until Oct. 28.