

FEATURE STORY

Doorway to Healing

BY KATHY LATOUR

Survivors find meaning through art.

"We are going to have the gallery full of doors," teacher and artist Cris Ewell told her class of cancer survivors in 2009. "You will walk into a room of doors, moments in time or space when there were decisions to make, life-changing moments. What is your door? Will you paint it for me?"

Nora Winn faced her door with paint brush in hand. She had joined the art class offered by Cancer Services of Memorial Medical Center in Modesto, Calif., in 2006, when, at age 50, loving art was a memory that had been displaced by a life of trying to make ends meet, thyroid cancer in 1993, disability and a recurrence of cancer in 2000. But she signed up.

The free class met in gallery space owned by Central California Art Association in downtown Modesto with supplies provided by the hospital and a local art store. Although the classes were offered to all survivors and caregivers, regardless of when or where they were treated for cancer, Winn was hesitant. She felt like an imposter because she hadn't undergone chemotherapy.

Ewell recalls that in the first class, Winn sat alone at a table in the far corner of the room. "To look at her and ask a question caused her to cower," Ewell says. "When she came back to the class, I remembered her artwork because she had used this rich media, and I called her by name."



Images courtesy of Sue White (left) and Sue Rossi (right).



"In my mother's family there lived a mortal enemy that stalks her sisters and brothers, nieces and nephews. Cancer is a word I have known all my life. It came for me in the spring of 1993. But I was lucky. Mine was not theirs. Mine was never meant to kill me, only there to teach me. I believe it came to me so I could learn the essence of real fear so that I could be strong for the ones I loved more than any others..." —Nora Winn [on the inspiration for her door]

Someone knew her name. It's the first thing Winn says about those early classes, and it made all the difference. She finished the 10-week beginner class, went on to the advanced class and ultimately completed a piece for the annual art show. She also blossomed as a person, trading depression for joy. "I had gotten so far

away from who I was. These classes helped me heal in so many ways,” Winn says, “and now I accept myself as a cancer survivor.”

Winn has returned to the free class often since its beginning, including the class when participants were given an actual door to paint. She calls her door “Hippie Girl Gets Cancer,” and she says the images on the different door panels represent the different parts of her treatment and the people who were there to support her.

“While doing that door, I didn’t think about it, but after it was finished, I could see the sunshine, and that is how I feel now. I have come out the other side.”

Art as therapy

Using the arts, including music, visual arts, dance, drama and writing, in healthcare environments has been documented as an intervention for helping cancer patients cope. Shown in studies to strengthen self-identity, promote spiritual and emotional well-being and reduce stress, art as therapy is also being evaluated for its economic benefits to both the hospital and the patient in shorter hospital stays, less medication and fewer complications.

While the exact physiologic process is unknown, some research indicates that contact with certain images and forms of art can stimulate the release of endorphins, the body’s own pain reliever and mood enhancer.

The documented benefits of participating in visual arts or art therapy range from improving quality of life and depression to strengthening positive feelings. For survivors, expressive art provides an opportunity to explore the journey and perhaps find closure and healing through subconscious expression when there are no right words.



Artist Gay Walker found that she was drawn to the images of the chrysalis and butterfly—and the metamorphosis they represent.

In Ewell’s classes, cancer remains in the background, she says. She provides different media, space and time, knowing that the power of the art will often result in awareness for those who want to tell the story of the image they have produced. This becomes clear when, at the end of the annual class cycle, members create a piece for a gallery show, and Ewell asks them to write about it.

“I have some who don’t want to, but for those who do, it’s the moment they can tell the story of the painting and read the story to the group. That writing is mounted next to the piece in the gallery. I don’t push it. I allow them to say what they want, but it’s not uncommon for an artist to say, ‘Wow, I didn’t know all that was in there.’”

The power of art

Art therapist Gay Walker, program coordinator for the Holistic Health Care

program at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo, Mich., says it's the transformative ability of art that makes it so powerful.

“Art transforms the ugliness or anger or fear into something better,” she says. “When you look at it, you get amazing insights as the unconscious bubbles to the surface, and you get a new way to look at what is going on.”

Walker benefited personally from her training when she faced a diagnosis of stage 1 breast cancer in 1998, creating art as a way to process the experience. Her art, she says, allowed her to express feelings and be as honest as she needed to be without constraint. Far from beautiful, many of the pieces explore her anger at the disease, she says.

After treatment ended, she found some parts of her life had been rearranged by cancer, so she created breast cancer retreats for area survivors and used expressive arts to explore the layers of her cancer experience with the other participants.

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—Gay Walker

Again and again, she says, she found herself pulled to the image of the chrysalis, the stage of metamorphosis and development when the caterpillar turns into a butterfly. “I was a caterpillar, and it was intense, so I went into the chrysalis to process and think about it. Then there was a point I was breaking out, and I could fly.”

A second cancer diagnosis took her back to the chrysalis, she says. “Sometimes we are the caterpillar, and sometimes we are the butterfly and then it may start again,” she says. “It's a cycle.”



“Keep Moving” is Karen Starrett Belfer's self-portrait after cancer treatment ended.

Being healed to healer

After a year of treatment for stage 3 ovarian cancer in 2003, 50-year-old Karen Starrett Belfer entered into a deep depression when she realized that her former life was gone. To process her feelings, she returned to creating art, what she calls the essence of her life.

Returning to her studio, she found herself gravitating toward oil painting, a serious shift from her earlier medium, mixed media and collage. Her first painting was a self portrait on 400-pound paper tacked to the walls of her studio. The goal wasn't to create a particular image, she says, she just wanted to keep moving her arm to see where it took her. She eventually named the piece "Keep Moving," and describes it as pivotal in her healing.

"I knew my feet were on the ground, and I was done with treatment," says the graphic designer from Ocean, N.J., "and I had to keep moving, allowing my new life to unfold. That was how it was part of my healing process. Art kept me moving and helped me redefine my life."

Where she moved was to a national hospital artist-in-residence program to learn about specific populations and how to use art as a means of healing. Today Starrett Belfer works with Alzheimer's patients, engaging them through art by providing opportunities for self expression.

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Taking Risks

Retired public school art teacher Ray Hamilton, 72, also found his art changing as he underwent treatment for lymphoma. Hamilton, who lives in northern Pennsylvania, was enjoying retirement in 2004 when weight loss and fatigue were diagnosed as lymphoma. A targeted treatment put him in remission, and he still continues taking the drug every six months. He calls it living on the five-year plan, with a new plan beginning every January.

"When I was very ill, everything appeared gray and dull," he says, "but as my health improved, it was as if the world became bright and colorful again, and I wanted color and brightness in my work."

Hamilton began a piece to reflect his cancer experience but found he couldn't get to the heart of what he wanted.

"For a while I was frustrated with it and ready to rip it up," he says, but a trip to London and the National Gallery of Art brought him face to face with the work of Francis Bacon. Bacon's work spoke to Hamilton, who went home having found the key to finishing the painting, ultimately titling it "Journey."

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From the oval at the base of the cross, life moves upward toward pure spirit in Ray Hamilton's "Journey."

Hamilton sees the message of the piece as life and its struggle, beginning in the oval at the bottom and moving up through childhood and adulthood until at the top where the end of life moves into the blue of the spirit going forward.

“But viewers will see other things that make sense to them,” Hamilton says.

Allowing others into her work has provided another kind of healing for Gay Walker. “Friends told me that I should put the art out there, and I said, ‘No, this is mine, and no one is supposed to see it.’”

When her friends prevailed, Walker put together a show for the hospital that was supposed to stay up two weeks because a hospital administrator was concerned it would be too negative. Then the doctors started hearing from patients about how courageous it was, and it remained for six months before traveling to other sites.

“It had a huge healing effect on people,” Walker says. “Now I think part of my healing is to do the art, and then put it out there.”