



BREAST CANCER

ACTION NEWS

"Techne tou biou, the craft of life. Care of the soul requires craft — skill, attention and art." Thomas Moore



Nike of Mastectomy, 1992, Lava Rock & Aluminum, 29" h x 14" d x 28" w
Artist: Kay Minto

The Arts in Healing

By Monica Klein

Healing art has been a part of our society since the first cave-painter drew his or her stories on the walls, or the first shaman entered a sick soul and restored life in a dance. Similarly, the contemporary artist uses something he or she has experienced at a very deep level and makes it accessible to others. Sculptor Kay Minto describes the healing artist as "being given license to 'put the finger in the wound'" She adds, "It's often exceedingly painful but frequently results in a physical manifestation that not only gives us greater insight, but allows us to freely experience the situation and share that experience with others in a tangible form."

Healing art is a way of connecting mind, body and soul. There are three working definitions of art that heals: Art as a form of therapy to understand one's feelings; art as an expression of the soul that can aid our recovery; and art that helps others get in touch with their feelings or brings serenity.

A study of personal support groups for cancer patients demonstrates the strong connection between spiritual well-being and bodily health. Dr. David Spiegel first published the findings of his research in *Psychiatric Times* (January 1990). In his study, 86 women with metastatic breast cancer who attended psychotherapy sessions and support group sessions lived twice as long, on average, than women without psychotherapy or support sessions.

These findings compel us to believe in a strong mind-body connection. If the body is ailing, then looking to the soul can supply valuable insights for healing. Because healing art comes from the soul of the artist, perhaps it can aid in this integration. It is up to future researchers to evaluate the quality-of-life benefits that patients and artists often report.

There is a bio-chemical explanation for how and why art can influence the body. Deforia Lane, MT-BC, PhD, director of music therapy at the Ireland Cancer Center in Cleveland, studied the effects of music on cancer patients and found that music triggers the brain stem to release neural impulses which affect autonomic nervous system reactions such as pulse rate, blood pressure, muscle tone and reflexes. The brain also releases neurotransmitters that can mask pain and step-up the immune response.

Dr. Michael Samuels, a California physician who has conducted extensive research on visualization in medicine and healing, cites that cancer patients who study an artist's rendition of a white blood cell and then visualize that cell are able to increase the number of these cells in their blood.

If listening to music and using art for visualization have such profound effects on the body, could a similar physiological process be occurring when a patient per-

sonally works with clay, paint, music or poetry? Several professional artists involved with BCAG's own "Healing Legacies" gave first-hand accounts of the effects of creating art both for their own recoveries and to help others.

Ellen Goldsmith, a poet, shared her thoughts on writing a collection of poems about her experience battling cancer. *No Pine Tree in this Forest is Perfect* was a "tool" to get her "images and feelings out in the open," she says. Paradoxically, the cancer poetry also allowed her to escape her disease and lose herself in creating. She now uses her poetry to teach radiology technicians the "emotional dimension of illness" in a project called *Crossing Boundaries: Poetry and Radiology*. Her poems are currently being edited for publication.

Mimi Thompson never seriously pursued painting until she discovered a lump
"HEALING" *Continued on page 5*

In The Beginning

By Ellen Goldsmith © 1995

When I first learned of the lump
I dreamed of losing
my car, my purse, my period

leaving my gloves
on the train, forgetting
my name.

I left a white nightgown
in a Boston hotel room.
A gold earring disappeared.

All these preparations were false.
I did not lose my breast.
It was taken.

Mission Statement

The Breast Cancer Action Group (BCAG) is a health, arts and educational organization which promotes the creative expression and healing of all women who have faced breast cancer.

Officers:

- Pamela Ferguson, President
Dallas, Texas
- Jesusa Krag, Vice-President
Shelburne, Vermont
- Kay Minto, Vice-President
Eagleville, California
- Ann Stokes, Vice-President
W. Chesterfield, New Hampshire
- Kathy Olwell, MSW, Secretary
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- Wendy Oppenheimer, Treasurer
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- Beverly Rhine, MA
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Executive Director:

Virginia Soffa, M.Ed.

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From the President

It is an honor to be elected BCAG president. The position sharpens my breast cancer activism, a vital force in my life since my 1987 mastectomy in New York. My paternal grandmother, Dora Wright Ferguson, died of breast cancer in El Paso Texas in the 1950s. Then the rate was one in 20. Now it's one in eight? I suspect the real figure is much higher, and involving younger and younger women. I recently heard about the 12-year-old daughter of migrant farm workers who went for a biopsy. The Dallas activists who told me about her blamed pesticides, and the appalling fact that migrant farm workers use empty pesticide cans for drinking water.

We need to become daughters of Rachel Carson. We need to make nuisances of ourselves wherever and whenever we come across toxic waste, chemical pollution and dumping in our backyards. Breast tissue, especially young tissue, seems to soak up nuclear and toxic waste.

Native American reservations are prime sites for dumping, as are low-income communities along the American border, rural areas and our cities, because the "Big Dumpers" think no one is looking and no one cares. They are in for a rude shock this fall in Texas when members of the Austin-based Foundation for a Compassionate Society set off in a "breast cancermobile" to stage protests at each nuclear and toxic-waste site in the state. I plan to drive to one of these protests for the BCAG.

I urge all of you to join our struggle in any way you can. If protest is not for you, then spread the word about "Healing Legacies," a traveling symbol of our outreach, art activism, networking and educational goals. Ask your local art museums and cancer hospitals to host an exhibition. Encourage survivors to contribute works of art, writing or video to this unique registry. Help us create scholarships for those women who can't afford the \$25 entry fee or to prepare their work for the exhibition, by donating to the BCAG. Organize fund raising events to help women who are self-supporting after losing jobs or health insurance because of breast cancer. No contribution or effort is too small.

At our first board national meeting in Columbus, Ohio in October '94, each of us offered something totally different. Helen Klebesadel, Carol MacDonald, Jesusa Krag, Kay Minto, Wendy Oppenheimer and Jude Burkhauser brought all the professional clout of the art



Officers from left: Wendy Oppenheimer, Kay Minto, Virginia Soffa, Executive Director, Pamela Ferguson, President, Jesusa Krag and Kathy Olwell.

world, art education, exhibitions and curating to the table.

Beverly Rhine wore bronze earrings showing single-breasted African-American women — her own creation — and a symbol of the shocking neglect of minority women by many breast cancer groups. Beverly has just been chosen to participate in the California "Women in Health Leadership Program," for emerging leaders in health advocacy. Ann Porter, museum director, and Nancy Fried, artist and recipient of a 1994 NEA grant for sculpture were with us in spirit.

As a social worker and a former radiology and mammography technician, Kathy Olwell brings us her insight into another highly controversial area of our struggle. Kay kept us all grounded by leading us in Tai chi by the river at dawn. Ann Stokes, our poet, who provides retreat homes for women artists in her woods in New Hampshire, became godmother to all of us.

Finally there was Ginny Soffa, a pint-sized powerhouse, without whom none of this would have been possible.

The BCAG board is a microcosm of all of you, and we are spread throughout the U.S. We are zero-, single- or double-breasted. True to the spirit of "Healing Legacies," we combine art with breast cancer activism and the raw art of survival.

