

PAINTINGS OF FEAR, HOPE, JOY AND HEALING**© 2003 - The Press Democrat , Santa Rosa, CA****DEBRA D. BASS****January 26, 2003**

When the Friday morning painting class convened at Martia Nelson's home, the group was in search of relief, not inspiration.

“It's not about painting a pretty picture. It's about healing through art,” said Vicki Garcia, who was diagnosed with cancer in October 2001.

Wearing a blue smock, Garcia held her brush like a pen, sweeping colors up and outward as if they emitted from a kaleidoscopic puddle. She is rumored to have painted nearly everything in her house that would stand still long enough.

Jinni Cellini stood next to her working on a colorful painting in acrylic and discussing breast prosthetics and bras, painting preferences and two paintings she sold to a neighbor. Diagnosed in April 2001, she admitted that she wasn't as sociable two years ago.

“It took time. You become so consumed with yourself and your illness and your doctor's appointment and your story that you don't see anything else,” Cellini said.

Susan Dunn put it another way.

“What did I do wrong?” Dunn said recounting her initial reaction.

She said it was the beginning of her mental recovery when she was able to state with conviction that “I am more than my disease.”

Looking down at the beginnings of the abstract watercolor image she was creating, Dunn admitted, “I have no idea what I'm going to paint, but something always comes out.”

She said that the leap of faith she uses to silence her internal critic has restored her faith in other aspects of her life.

“It instills a trust in you that things will always work out, even if you don't know what comes next,” Dunn said.

Laura Feahr was painting a bright flower on her canvas using a putty knife. She turned to a new visitor in the group and innocently blurted out, “I have a new breast. I've been showing it to anyone who wants to see.”

After her diagnosis in November 2001, a mastectomy followed in January 2002. The December reconstruction is newly healed and received a slew of admiring comments during an impromptu unveiling.

Perhaps you've guessed that this is a no-holds-barred painting group. This is not a social

gathering where brush strokes are critiqued and every work is scrutinized by envious colleagues. Participants paint what they feel, they paint their frustration, they paint their fear, they paint their joy.

At the end of each session, the painters don't pack up the supplies and head out the door. During the closing round of show-and-tell, everyone holds up their new creations and talks a little about what it means to them. This would seem daunting if the atmosphere weren't so communal and inviting.

Thoughtful compliments are abundant, but they don't sound forced.

And now Nelson has coordinated a show that will showcase work from the group in the halls of the Redwood Regional Medical Group building in Santa Rosa through July.

The exhibit will consist of about 80 works by 35 artists, all cancer survivors but not all members of the group, who hope their work will inspire others.

Sponsored by Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital's Cancer Center Library Fund, the group meets twice a week at Nelson's home. Cancer survivors only need supply their imagination.

Nelson initially launched the artistic cancer support group using her own money a few years ago in an effort to reconcile the loss of her mother to the disease. She says painting felt like natural chemotherapy and started a group open to women who are dealing with, or have grappled with, any form of cancer.

Nelson, who isn't an art teacher, espouses the most liberating of philosophies.

"The only paint wasted is paint that stays in the tube," she said, prodding members of her group to express themselves liberally and often. Paint is synonymous with potential among participants, and at the beginning of every session, anything is possible.

Everyone knows that they are more than the sum of their parts, but it doesn't stop most of us from dwelling on what we have lost, how we have failed or in what manner we remain unfulfilled.

Populated by novices, the painting group allows participants to marvel at accomplishments. And the camaraderie of enjoying yourself in a room where no one stares at your close-cropped hair, tip-toes around your illness or jokes inappropriately is a definite bonus.

Of the nearly 30 women participating in the groups Friday morning and Tuesday night (which is open to men even though it doesn't have any yet) the would-be painters have produced a slew of works. Nelson has covered nearly every inch of wall space in her home with her artwork and she encourages group members to do the same.

Nelson tells people to pay more attention to what that voice deep within is telling them. She tells people to listen when that voice tells them that they are better than they think they are.

"This work came from you like a message from your soul," Nelson said.