

When Words are not Enough

Coping with cancer through art

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Art can help people heal. Images of healing fill the art studio at Wellness Place in Palatine. Paper canvases rich with expression and emotion hang from the walls. A lone teardrop rests against a pale yellow sky while yellow and orange flames threaten a neighboring canvas. Drawings and paintings of rainbows, volcanoes, tornados, and flower gardens are all common themes that emerge in this art studio.

The studio resides in the lower level of Wellness Place, a home-like environment that provides programs and services at no cost to cancer survivors, their family, friends, and caregivers. These images have all been created by children whose lives have been touched by cancer. Some of these children have cancer, others have a parent, grandparent, or sibling with a cancer diagnosis. Cancer impacts the entire family: an 8-year-old recently diagnosed with a brain tumor; a 16-year-old attempting to make sense of her father's terminal diagnosis; a 7-year-old trying to figure out why his mom got the "bad" cancer; an 18-year-old learning to cope with his younger brother's death. Through individual and group art therapy, these children and teenagers are encouraged and empowered to express their thoughts and emotions and share their stories and experiences.

The art of expression

When a cancer diagnosis impacts a child's life, their world may begin to feel out of control. For the child diagnosed with cancer, hospital stays and clinic visits become routine. Needle sticks, chemo, scans, and procedures become all too familiar while simultaneously learning to cope with and manage the physical side effects of treatment such as hair loss, weight changes, fatigue, and nausea. For the child who has a parent or loved one diagnosed, their concerns often center around "Who will take care of me, when will they be better, why did this happen, and are they going to die?" Parents are assisted in finding age appropriate explanations and are encouraged to use words like "cancer," "tumor," "chemotherapy," and "radiation." Art making gives back a sense of control from the choice of materials to the ability to adapt and change an image after it has been created. Children rely upon stability and consistency, and cancer often brings to surface fears of change and fears of the unknown.

Art therapy provides opportunities to explore these fears. Art making instills hope, validates emotions, and creates a sense of normalcy. In the presence of a professional art therapist and within that therapeutic relationship, art making provides opportunities to express and explore the cancer journey in a nonverbal, nonjudgmental, less threatening manner. Verbalizing fears and labeling emotions such as anger, sadness, worry,



PHOTO: PHIL DEPPE


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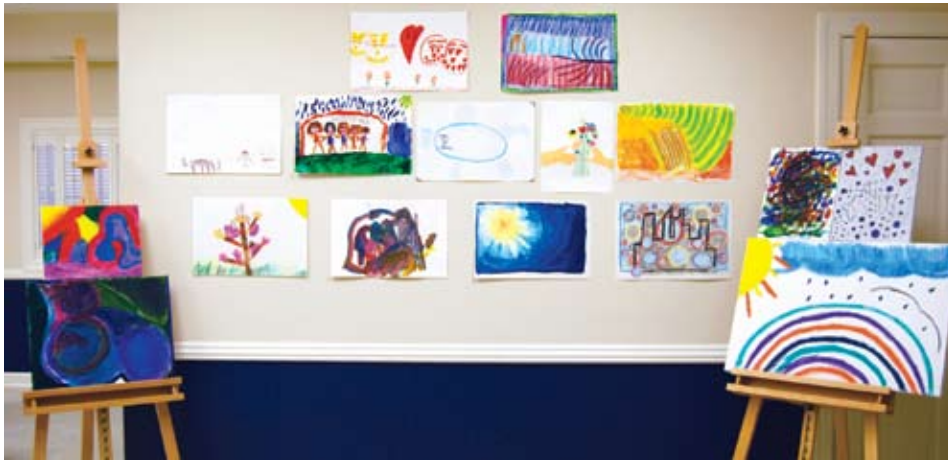
confusion, hope, joy, and relief may be too intimidating, while the youngest of children may not have developed the necessary language skills to describe in words how and what they are experiencing. Art therapists serve as a witness to the creative and healing process and act as a guide for deeper expression, exploration, and processing through the metaphors of images created. When words are not enough or thoughts and emotions are too difficult to verbalize, art provides a safe place for expression.

A safe space

Children and teens often struggle to understand what cancer is and why and how they or their mom, dad, or sibling got it. Through art they can draw out their fears and worries, communicate their thoughts and ideas, and nurture their hopes and dreams. A safe space such as this art studio encourages exploration of all paths of the cancer journey: the ugly and the dark, the hopeless and the unknown, as well as the beauty and the light, hopeful and familiar.

Art therapy is about expressing and honoring all images that emerge. The blended swirls of light and dark, lightening bolts streaking across pages, imaginary worlds where cancer doesn't exist — these are the images that emerge from within at the Wellness Place studio, honoring the many experiences of children and teens impacted by cancer.

For more information about programs at Wellness Place, visit our Web site at www.wellnessplace.org or call 847-221-2400. 



PHOTOS: LORI MACKEY



SOLE IMPRESSIONS

This summer, Wellness Place will be initiating a six-month project called Sole Impressions, a walk with cancer. Survivors and their families are invited to participate in art therapy workshops to create a "shoe" commemorating their experience with cancer. While supplies last, Wellness Place will be providing white canvas tennis shoes as a blank canvas where individuals can gather to create their Sole (soul) Impression out of a canvas shoe, artfully describing their journey with cancer as a survivor, family member, or caregiver. Basic art supplies will be provided and unique customization is encouraged. There are no limits to creativity other than the relationship to a cancer experience. Select submissions will be chosen for inclusion in a large format book and to be displayed in a Sole Impressions art exhibit. Contact Wellness Place for more information and workshop dates at 847-221-2400 or www.wellnessplace.org.

