

As seen in *The Pueblo Chieftain*, March 4, 2020,

'Reborn into a new life'

*Cancer survivors find healing through art*

Jon Pompia [jpompia@chieftain.com](mailto:jpompia@chieftain.com)



Entitled "Living with Cancer," it's a vibrant wash of red, orange, blue and white.

Ocean-like, with whispers of lovely flower shapes and a promise of hope and brighter days.

Less visible is a single red dot in the center of the white canvas: a representation of its creator, cancer survivor Kryste Brown.

"I started with just that single red dot on the canvas I painted all white," Brown said. "For the first five months I had cancer, I felt so alone: it was just myself, and nothing else. And I just couldn't get past that."

Mirroring Brown's confrontation with the invasive disease, that solitary crimson sphere eventually came to be surrounded by a burst of warm, healing colors.

"Down here in the right corner is my family, without whom I couldn't have gotten through it," Brown explained. "The orange is my chemotherapy and the red is the chemo in my veins: because I could literally feel it running through my veins. I was so sick.

"And the blue? That's me overcoming it and starting to live with the cancer. They're waves, because I am such a water person. And the white is just mixing everything together, just as I came into a new life."

Offered through St. Mary-Corwin Medical Center, Sites and Insights is a mindful therapeutic program that encourages cancer survivors like Brown to express, through the beauty of art, the pent-up feelings — shock, fear, anger, isolation, sadness — that accompany diagnosis, treatment and recovery.

Over the course of six weeks, 11 cancer survivors were guided by Vicki Mackie, Sites and Insights' executive director, through a journey of self-discovery and emotional understanding equal parts art class and therapy session.

"As a cancer survivor and a caregiver myself, one of the things I've found is that we are truly lacking in trying to help the emotional part of it," Mackie said. "And one of the things I have found through my research is that when you're going through such a life-altering experience — you can go to the best oncologists, the best hospitals and clinics — and they can either cure you or tell you that there's no evidence of cancer, from there on out.

"But if you don't get healed on a deeper level, you will go back to get cured, again."

With brushes, acrylics and canvases serving as the tools of this healing and coping trade, Mackie gently encourages the survivors to speak directly from the soul, rather than the mind.

"What I do is teach them how to pull out some of those harmful emotions they've been stuffing down: which is something we all do," Mackie said. "But once we stuff those down, it starts deteriorating your immune system."

And for systems weakened by the cancer battle, with all its accompanying worry and stress, the effect can be especially devastating.

"Like I said, if you don't deal with it, you will be going back to get cured again," Mackie promised.

The pieces created through Sites and Insights are of an "abstract" nature, which is by design.

"When you come into the class, I don't want you to think that you need to be an artist to create art," Mackie explained. "But art comes from your heart, your spirit, your soul. And that's what we are dealing with, and that comes out in these pictures."

Approaching Sites and Insights as "an ordinary art class," Lisa Sekulich, a brain cancer survivor, said she was initially disappointed with Mackie's opening line: "If you came here to draw horses and houses, you came to the wrong place."

"Little did I know how many emotions were going to be brought up and out," Sekulich said. "Each project would have an emotional prompt, where Vicki would encourage us to experience a feeling or an emotion associated with our cancer journey. Then I'd hear: 'You have about 15 seconds to finish your masterpieces.'"

"That's when I would paint like crazy, doing everything and anything just to finish my project. But I never realized it wasn't about finishing: it was about the emotions."

Diagnosed with breast cancer in 2017, Brown, after "a really tough battle, just super hard," eventually emerged cancer free.

And while the disease had been cast from her body, its remnants proved much more difficult to banish.

"I was really in a bad place when I started Sites and Insights six weeks ago," Brown said. "After cancer, it's just really hard to get back to a normal life. I was always outgoing and a go-getter, but I no longer felt like me anymore. I had to get to a new normal."

With no formal art experience, Brown entered Sites and Insights with a hope of rediscovering her old, vibrant self.

"Vicki prompted us to dig into our feelings and transfer that to the canvas," she said. "Whatever we felt inside should go on the canvas."

In Brown's piece entitled "Transforming Anger," ugly jet-black roots fill an earthen abyss.

"That represents the dark hole that I was in when I had cancer," Brown said.

Those ominous roots, however, sprout from the dirt into a joyful burst of bright white, yellow, blue and red.

"That's me digging myself out of that hole and transforming into a new person," Brown said. "Because I'm not that old person anymore. The yellow, to me, represents 'newborn,' being reborn into a new life. I have to forget about that old me in the dirt, in that hole.

"And this program helped me do that."

The Sites and Insights' works of art are on display at the Sangre de Cristo Arts and Conference Center's third floor boardroom of the Helen T. White Gallery building.

*jpompia@chieftain.com*

*Twitter: @jpompia*

