

The Impact of Brushes With Cancer



Twist Out Cancer® provides psychosocial support to individuals touched by cancer through creative arts programming. What started in 2012 as a small grass roots online community movement has evolved into an international non-profit that has touched over 140,000 people around the world through our community wide programming, which is designed for previvors, survivors, caregivers, supporters, and artists.

Due to the global pandemic, Twist Out Cancer pivoted back to its roots and provided all of its programming virtually in 2020. Over 10,000 people were impacted this year through virtual Twistshops and Brushes With Cancer® programs, which were held in Austin, Chicago, and for the first time, held exclusively for the employees of a single company – the General Motors Design Center in Detroit.

Brushes With Cancer is the signature program of Twist Out Cancer and matches those touched by cancer with artists to create a unique piece of artwork that reflects on their personal journey with cancer. This unique celebration of survivorship and hope pairs previvors, survivors, and caregivers (referred to as Inspirations) with talented Artists working in a variety of mediums. Those touched by cancer share their ‘twist on cancer’ – stories, feelings and experiences with the artist, which serves as the inspiration for the art. Since 2012, we have had 980 people participate in Brushes with Cancer as either Inspirations or artists, which has led to 490 pieces of art that have been created to represent 490 individual journeys with cancer. The following are a few examples of the 85 works of art that were created in honor of our Inspirations in 2020.

More information is available at twistoutcancer.org.

“For One Moment”

Inspiration [Freia Hovd](#) and Artist [Carlos Ortiz](#)

Freia’s Twist on Cancer: Last Spring, I had a lot of pain in my neck, my lower back, and my legs. When I found out it was cancer, I was confused because I did not understand that kids get cancer. The treatment is hard and there are lots of side effects, like tiredness, nausea and pain. I did not feel like myself. I learned that it’s okay to be afraid and sometimes you can not just “suck it up, buttercup.” Even though I was feeling bad and treatment was hard, I never gave up. During my treatment, two things made me very happy: doing art and dancing. It was really hard to get back to dancing because I couldn’t really walk because of all the medicine, but I kept trying. I also did a lot of different kinds of art. I got better at art because I had a lot of time to do art because I couldn’t go outside. I wish I had not been diagnosed at all but then I may not have gotten better at my art. I’m still in treatment but will be done next year. I am so excited.

Carlos’ Artist Statement: Through the course of my life I have come across a few people who emanate light. My friend Freia is one of those rare few. She is a competitive Irish dancer, who’s passion for life is expressed through her dancing, her radiant smile, and her gentle demeanor. I am so lucky that I was able to collaborate with Freia in creating this painting. Freia selected this image of herself during a moment of reflection in the dance studio. Dancing gives Freia a vehicle to forget about her treatments and the cancer she is battling.

Freia and I took turns working on this canvas in our respective work spaces. I love the direction in which Freia took our painting. Freia is responsible for the color selection, the use of water colors, and the design of the heart on her shirt. She asked me if she could use glitter on the painting, and I answered that I was only hoping that she would! Freia’s framing of herself in the golden twinkling of the shimmering medium is an unscripted manifestation of the positivity and the intangible, but unmistakable, light that radiates from this remarkable young lady’s heart. People have thanked me for participating in this project. I’m the one who’s grateful.



From Brushes With Cancer in Austin, October 25, 2020.



Freia and Carlos are proud to stand next to the art piece they worked on together.



Freia works on her own painting.

“I am so lucky that I was able to collaborate with Freia in creating this painting.”



From Brushes With Cancer at the GM Design Center, September 25, 2020.

“A Tough Nut To Crack”

Inspiration [Carol Garrett](#) and Artist [Kirk Roda](#)

Carol’s Twist on Cancer: When you get ‘the’ call, whether you have been expecting it or not, time stands still, then the tears begin to flow. Finally, you take a deep breath and can ask “where do we go from here?” So begins your journey.

Being a survivor for over ten years now, I thought my journey was complete and it was one I shared less often with others. This is when I came across Brushes with Cancer. Being able to share my journey with a stranger and have that journey transformed into Art is an experience that I never thought I needed, but now has become one I will never forget.

Kirk’s Artist Statement: When I first signed up to be a part of Brushes With Cancer, I expected to be paired with someone whose personal experience with cancer would leave them emotionally fragile or psychologically vulnerable. What I found instead was a woman with incredible inner strength and personal resolve. I based these assumptions on my own experience with this disease. My father died about thirty years ago from cancer. Knowing the irrational fear I’ve lived with, dreading that I myself might get cancer, I know I’d be a total mess of emotions, and paralyzed with fear if ever I was given the diagnosis.

From my conversations with Carol, I found a woman who looked cancer in the face and did whatever it took to beat the disease. With a no-nonsense inner strength, she dealt with a litany of complex emotions, but through it all, she never let the experience defeat her. So, from the cancer’s perspective, she’s a Tough Nut to Crack.

I sculpted Carol’s emotional likeness on the outside of walnuts, each one expressing many of the different states of mind she experienced...fear, sadness, calm, grief, physical pain, resolve, joy. Some other walnuts’ expressions are half-formed, like faded feelings or mixed emotions. Some are not formed at all; emotions yet to be had. They collectively represent the mass of feelings Carol had, and still is having, dealing with her illness. Yet through all of it, she has not cracked...

Well done Carol.

“Being able to share my journey with a stranger and have that journey transformed into Art is an experience that I never thought I needed, but now has become one I will never forget.”

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“Miracolo”

Inspiration [Briana Camilleri](#) and Artist [Taylor Lazzara](#)

Briana’s Twist On Cancer: My diagnosis arrived at the most celebratory time of my life, a week before my wedding. In August 2019, I went to the doctor for one thing and found out it was cancer instead. Having cancer and with my wedding quickly approaching, I felt like I was juggling between uncertainty and total certainty, loss and gain, sadness and elation, and a world of feelings in between. I didn’t want such a scary time to overshadow the most joyful time-so we didn’t tell many people until afterwards.

Every day we get is a blessing. We never know what the next minute will bring, but you have to take it all a moment at a time.

This year has been a rollercoaster of ups and downs, but I think that cancer helps to appreciate it all that much more. The lows help you appreciate the highs of life that much more. It has helped me to take every day for what it is and stop planning so much because you never know how much life can shift in a matter of moments. I’ve learned to lean on those around me and that love can take you farther than you ever thought possible. I’ve also been grateful to make new friends along the way, people that I can rely on to help me navigate. It has also made me appreciate my body, despite its constant (and difficult) changes. I am powerful and strong, my spirit cannot be defeated (even though some days it’s easier said than done).

Taylor’s Artist Statement: “Every day may not be good, but there’s something good in every day.” This is one of my Inspiration’s favorite quotes, one she turns to when things feel hard. This painting is a representation of how beauty can be found in dark times and how dark times often lead to something so incredibly beautiful and bright. I’ve had the pleasure of getting to know my Inspiration on a personal level, experience some dark times together, and then share in the most beautiful gift we could have ever dreamed. I have been completely inspired by her magnetic soul and contagious spirit, and look forward to continuing to share our stories with one another as they unfold.



From Brushes With Cancer in Chicago, November 14, 2020.

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“Uplifted”

Inspiration [Raychel Funk](#) and Artist [Sharon Arffa](#)

Raychel’s Twist On Cancer: My breast cancer experience began on Valentines Day 2011. I had two small boys, ages 4 and 9, and a loving husband. Thankfully, my support system gave me the feeling of being surrounded by pillows. I relied not only on my people, but on women who had already traveled down this road. For me, connection was key. I felt I could breathe, even beat it, with my people.

Somehow, I was paired with Sharon, my artist, and (I hope) lifelong friend. Her generosity of spirit, both in her art as well as her gift of connection, have been a gift to me. xo

For me, cancer will be a lifelong theme. And I will fight it fiercely and passionately, with my people beside me.

Sharon’s Artist Statement: We spoke of the beauty of understanding from friends and family when a cancer diagnosis is revealed. She felt supported, but not just secure and safe, but elevated and encouraged. She had visions of hands holding up pillows that were holding up her body and soul. In feathers floating upward, I used a metaphor of pillows, that is a feather floating upward.



From Brushes With Cancer in Austin, October 25, 2020.



Raychel (L) is overcome with emotion when seeing the painting that Sharon (R) made for her.

“Embrace”

Inspiration [Lisa Glick](#) and Artist [Nicole Gordon](#)

Lisa’s Twist On Cancer: My mother’s diagnosis of ovarian cancer came late in the progression. She managed to live 3 years from diagnosis to death. What transpired in the last 13 months of her life was truly remarkable and beautiful. My mother’s grace and appreciation of life paved the way for all of us, her family and friends, to share our feelings more intimately. As her illness progressed, she became more radiant, glowing with love, compassion, kindness and courage.

And we had FUN. And we LAUGHED.
And we CRIED. And we CELEBRATED.
We celebrated her life and her legacy.

May her memory be a blessing.

Nicole’s Artist Statement: I created this painting about Lisa’s experience caring for her mother during her final stages of ovarian cancer. The imagery for the painting was chosen after many intimate conversations with Lisa about her beautiful relationship with her mother and her family.

The central narrative of the painting revolves around a story that Lisa shared with me about a memorable trip that she took with her mother when she was feeling well enough to travel. Lisa and her mother traveled to New York to see a professional tennis match together. Lisa described a beautifully intimate moment on this trip when she curled up with her mother in bed like she did as a child. The image of a mother and child as the centerpiece to this painting is symbolic of the feelings of tenderness, connectedness and joy between Lisa and her mother.

I wove in imagery of many other memories and stories that Lisa shared with me during our conversations.

The birds in front of the glowing moon represent Lisa’s family including her parents, Lisa and her brother. One of Lisa’s mother’s favorite rings is worn on the mother’s finger in the painting. Lastly, Lisa and her mother’s initials are carved into the wooden bed frame. Lisa and her mother share first and last initials and their middle initials are woven together in the artwork.



From *Brushes With Cancer* in Chicago, November 14, 2020.

“The image of a mother and child as the centerpiece to this painting is symbolic of the feelings of tenderness, connectedness and joy between Lisa and her mother.”

“Ben Kelly”

Inspiration [Ben Kelly](#) and Artist [Rad Murdza](#)

Ben’s Twist on Cancer: My scars have healed. I don’t go to the doctor every week. My blood counts have normalized. From the outside, my life looks like it has returned to “ordinary,” and sometimes, a whole day passes without me thinking about cancer. But I won’t let my life go back to “ordinary” – I want to continue to find joy in waking up healthy, to tap reserves of energy even when I’m exhausted for “one more piggy-back ride,” and to fully immerse myself in the things that matter most – rich relationships with those around me.

“It always seems impossible until it’s done”
– Nelson Mandela

Rad’s Artist Statement: At first I was scared by the topic. Cancer. I was afraid that I couldn’t bear to hear a really terrible and sad story. But I met Ben and when we talked he made the whole experience pleasant. He is so positive, all the time.

He changed my outlook on cancer and his story has been a game changer. We decided to work together as I created. I wanted to share his story as he wanted it told. I don’t think he ever told his story and he seemed excited to have the chance. Ben’s excitement fueled me as an artist and a person. We were determined to fit all the parts of his cancer story on one canvas. Each of the images is part of what he shared with me. When he was in bed sick that was his low point, but it is only one part of the story.

Ben is an amazing person. This was an awesome journey.



From Brushes With Cancer at the GM Design Center, September 25, 2020.

“Ben’s excitement fueled me as an artist and a person. We were determined to fit all the parts of his cancer story on one canvas.”

“New Roots”

Inspiration [Jamie Rappoport](#) and Artist [Michele Kellner](#)

Jamie’s Twist On Cancer: As a previvor watching my brother battle stage 4 pancreatic cancer, I feel immeasurably blessed to have access to life-saving genetic information that gave me the agency to minimize my odds of ovarian and breast cancer through preventative surgeries. It has been a trying road, emotionally and physically, but I celebrate my health and resilience as I discover what it means to live in a new body with an altered sense of self. I’m feeling strong, inspired, and reinvigorated in my own life and in the mission to support my brother on his cancer journey.

Michele’s Artist Statement: Touching Jamie’s heart has been a gorgeous experience. As we talked and I listened I felt engulfed in her vibrant, loving spirit. What I heard in my heart space in alignment to Jamie, was that she is a creator! Her journey has her growing new roots, new strengths both physical and emotional, and a new future born from the foundation of family love that she so clearly has known. Looking into Jamie’s heart through this story of her life, I saw green, I saw lush, I saw life. I saw Jamie as a tree of life.



From Brushes With Cancer in Chicago, November 14, 2020.



Over a Zoom session with Michele, Jamie is overjoyed to see her painting for the first time.

“Pink Sunrise”

Inspiration [Torrence Spence](#) and Artist [Kate Wade](#)

Torrence’s Twist on Cancer: After being diagnosed at 18 months old, relapsing five times over the course of nine years, and undergoing total brain and spine radiation for 6 weeks, this girl has chosen joy.

Torrence knows that each day we wake up we have a choice, happiness or anger. She chooses joy each and every day and spreads her happiness around like confetti. Spend a day with her, and her infectious laugh will change your life. You would never guess the hardship she has seen and her smile is a testimony to that.

Kate’s Artist Statement: This piece was created for Torrence and her mom Traci. Together they are a powerhouse of positivity. I wanted this piece to showcase their bond and how it was strengthened as they went through this journey. Torrence developed Cancer as a toddler, and went through multiple treatments as she grew, and while the Cancer came back and treatments continued, her mom Traci was always right by her side.

The title “Pink Sunrise” was given because the pink Texas sunrises have always reminded me that each day is truly a gift to be honored and to be reminded of the inherent beauty around us. Pink is also Torrence’s favorite color! Her positive spirit really inspired me to always look to the bright side and because of this, I added a tiny bit of golden yellow thread to each of the sections. The yellow thread symbolizes the stitches that occurred in surgery, the stitches on the blankets that comforted them and how the last bright star seen in the early morning sky shines the brightest as a reminder of hope.

The balloons are symbolic of her Cancer treatments and how Torrence is able to be released from them. Although the road ahead is long and potentially rocky, Hope is always in the hearts of us all.

Torrence and Traci’s story of their journey together will continue to inspire to me keep smiling, keep laughing and keep searching for what I love about this lifetime. It is a reminder to all that in any hardship there is beauty and how bonds are strengthened because of it. Keep your head and heart held high, you are infinite source of light!



From Brushes With Cancer in Austin, October 25, 2020.



Torrence Spence.



You can view all of the art pieces created to represent the personal journey with cancer for 85 individuals around the country in 2020 here: twistoutcancer.org/brushes/artist-collaborations-from-all-cities/.

Want to Join the Movement? Contact us at info@twistoutcancer.org to sign up for our e-newsletter and stay up-to-date on all upcoming Brushes With Cancer programs, Twistshops, and other events. You can also email us for information on our Brushes With Cancer programs at brushes@twistoutcancer.org.

More information on Twist Out Cancer is available at twistoutcancer.org.

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