

A Brush with Cancer

10 YEARS OF SHARING, CONNECTING, AND HEALING

TWIST
OUT
CANCER





**"Things I wanted to tell you:
Mark and Aliza Ainis at The Dead Sea"**

Inspiration: Aliza Ainis
Artist: Ofer Katz

BWC Tel Aviv, 2019

"Amethyst"

Inspiration: Sonya Keshwani
Artist: Sujata Gazder

BWC Chicago, 2020



(PHOTO CREDIT: SONYA KESHWANI)

Healing Through Fashion

While Sonya Keshwani was diagnosed with breast cancer at 29, she wasn't prepared for how hair loss can affect so many women, including herself.

"Women don't have options that make them feel beautiful and confident during hair loss," Keshwani said. "Things that are out there make you look like a cancer patient, and I wanted to look like myself."

Hair loss from cancer treatment is not just going bald – there are many side effects that go along with it, including migraines, scalp sensitivity and bruising. With the head being so sensitive during this time, wigs can be extremely uncomfortable. Additionally, there is care that comes with hair loss, including applying SPF, as well as scalp oil massages to increase blood flow.

"I wanted a small collection of beautiful head wraps and couldn't find any," Keshwani said. "So I started to create my own head wraps between chemo sessions."

While in treatment, Keshwani launched her business: SyleEsteem Wardrobe. The company makes stylish head wraps that are inspired by hair loss from cancer treatment, but can be worn by anyone. Each wrap is designed by a cancer

survivor and the special twist is for every head wrap purchased, Keshwani donates a wrap to a cancer patient. There is also an option to sponsor a head wrap donation.

So, when Keshwani was chosen for 2020 Brushes with Cancer Chicago, it was clear she'd be a perfect match with fashion designer, Sujata Gazder.

"The first time we spoke, it was easy to connect with her and we share cultural backgrounds as well," Keshwani said. "She understood the dynamic of my situation in terms of my family being my support system. She knows what that's like in an Indian household."

As for Gazder's impression of Keshwani, she said she was blown away.

"She still has such joy for life and has become even stronger than she was," Gazder said. "You can either build yourself into a negative spiral or a positive one. At the end of the day, our essences are just looking for love and acceptance, and in Sonya's case I think she had the chutzpah to fight this battle and get where she is today."

Color and textiles are a big part of Gazder's work and for Keshwani, she carefully chose

colors that represent a fighting spirit. The dress Sujata created for Sonya is a vibrant purple, which represents spirituality. Gold is threaded throughout the dress, which Gazder used to represent courage and is stylized as the Tree of Life, representing the support Keshwani received from her family.

"I was drawn to purple because it is a journey in understanding who you are when you go through a life changing experience like dealing with cancer," Gazder said. "The gold aspect is beautiful, it's got a sparkle to it, it's strength – all things I would associate with someone starting her own business and sticking her nose at cancer."

Finally, Gazder incorporated ostrich feathers all along the gown's skirt, representing plumage and hair loss.

"I felt plumage was part of her journey," she said. "I used ostrich feathers on the tulle because one thing that stood out was plumage – how women have this strong identity with their hair and whether you want to keep it or don't want to, there's a strong connection and I wanted to reflect that in the piece I made for her."



A Surprising Connection

Anna Feneis had participated as a Brushes with Cancer Chicago Artist prior to being paired with Inspiration Mardi Kaplan, but nothing could prepare her for her 2020 experience with Kaplan.

“Every time I hung up with Mardi, I felt like I could have talked for two more hours,” Feneis said. “I would look at my husband and say ‘I have never felt so safe and natural right off the bat.’”

Shortly after the two connected, Feneis’ father, also an artist, was diagnosed with cancer. If that wasn’t difficult enough to come to terms with, a dear friend was diagnosed for a third time. Feneis was luckily in the right company.

“I don’t know why they paired us, but there was some sort of hand in it,” Feneis said. “Talking to Mardi and learning her story was therapy for me because I could come to her. It was really lucky.”

Feneis was particularly inspired by the way Kaplan handled her breast cancer diagnosis, treatment and recovery. A week after Kaplan was diagnosed with breast cancer, she left for Morocco.

“I look back and think, maybe I did that knowing I wouldn’t be going anywhere for a while,” Kaplan said.

That’s how Kaplan set the tone for her cancer journey: she wasn’t going to let it get in the way of the things that brought her joy. By continuing on with life, Kaplan had an opportunity to face her diagnosis head on.

“She went on a trip to Morocco right after



ANNA FENEIS & MARDI KAPLAN

getting diagnosed!” Feneis said. “That’s what I want my kids to do. I want my daughters to hear something that scares them, do their research, learn about it and move forward.”

The two built such a connection they decided to merge both their cancer journeys into one. Feneis took a painting of her father’s, cut it up and used the strips as ferns in her Brushes with Cancer piece for Kaplan.

“I feel like this was such a two-sided experience,” Kaplan said. “Even the piece of art isn’t about me, it’s about our relationship – all the colors and craziness of it.”

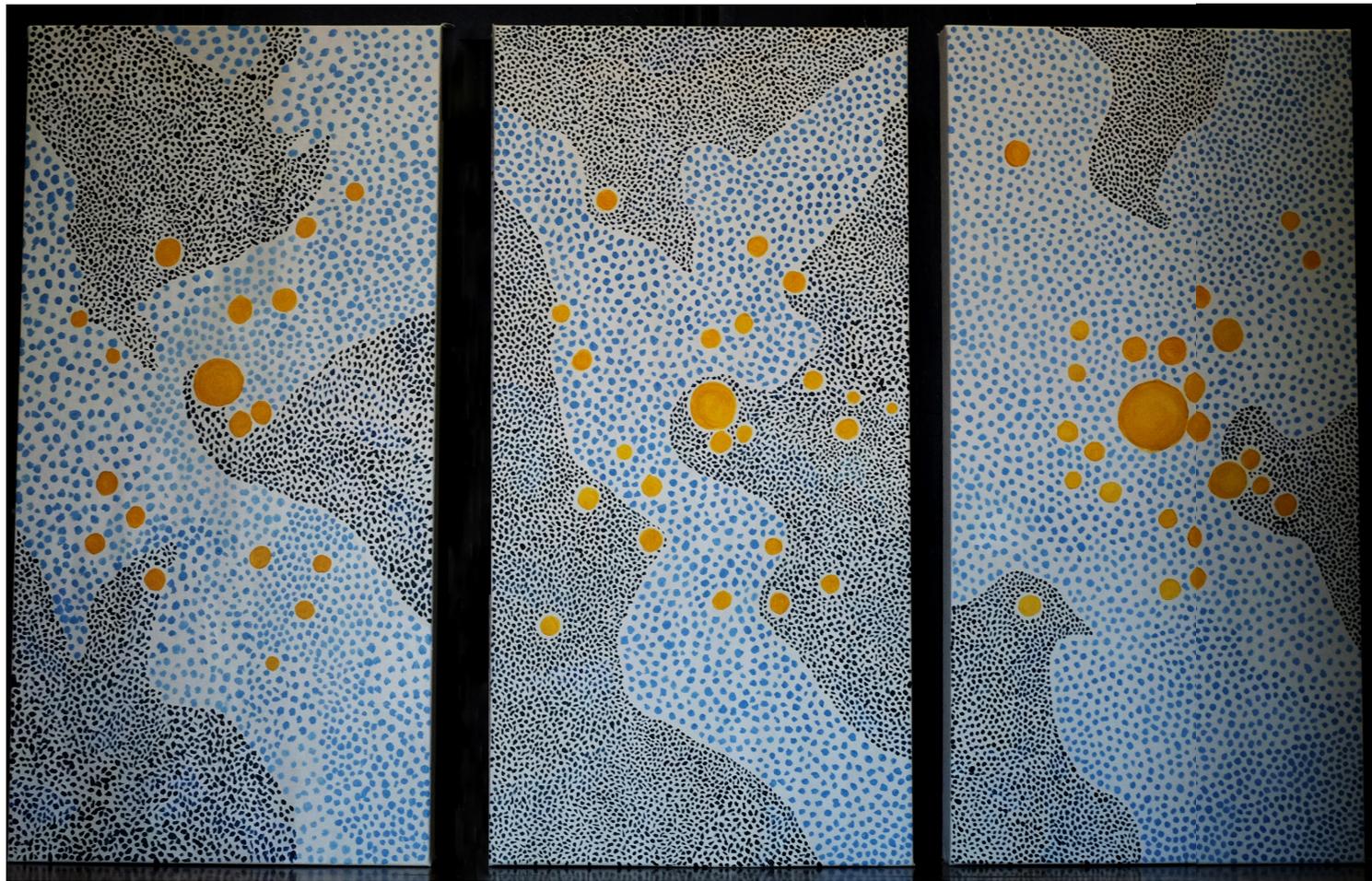


PHOTO CREDIT: ALISON CONKLIN

"Where the Light Enters You"

BWC Philadelphia, 2019

Inspiration: Devon Messner (In Loving Memory)
 Artist: Marie McGrory

“I truly believe everything in life happens for a reason. Lung cancer chose me. A cancer diagnosis has a way of transforming your entire being. I’m not the same person today that I was before my cancer diagnosis. I allowed cancer to change me. What was meant to destroy me- actually made me an even better version of myself. On March 1st 2018, the phone call came that changed the course of my life forever. I was at work at the time and, after the initial shock faded, I allowed myself a short cry. I realized that there was only one thing to do: WIN! Having a positive attitude is a major factor in getting yourself through a cancer diagnosis. My journey took me through brain surgery, a round of chemotherapy, and thoracic surgery to remove the primary tumor from my lung; all very necessary steps to return to a cancer-free life. From my very first meeting with my medical team, I let everyone know I was determined to beat stage 4 lung cancer. Nothing would stop me from reaching this goal. My children, Marina (15) and Michael (11), were and still are my daily inspirations. Even in the midst of a devastating disease, they were strong, supportive, and helpful. They surrounded me with their love and attention throughout the entire process. Getting to know Marie, my artist, was an extra blessing in my journey. Speaking to her about my cancer was such a freeing experience. She is one of the kindest souls I have ever met and I’m so happy to call her a friend.”

—DEVON MESSNER, INSPIRATION

“Devon is a light and joy. Faced with unthinkable odds as a young mother, she fearlessly entered a time that for many, might be the darkest period of their lives, and came out stronger and brighter than ever before. During our first conversation she quoted her favorite poet, Rumi: ‘The wound is the place where the light enters you.’ Devon has endless light entering her, and through this experience she has changed her life for the better. Though she completed her treatment and has had clear scans for over a year, she still faced a terrifying medical anomaly this summer, requiring emergency brain surgery. Speaking to her in the days afterward, she only had good news and joy to share. She was grateful and happy and feeling good. Devon reminds me constantly that life is full of light and dark times, represented by the blues in this triptych. We may never know when the next dark wave is coming. But Devon and her light glows and grows as it pulls the good people in her life closer to her orbit. The yellow circles in this painting represent Devon and her constellation of loved ones. Through the dark waves they grow bigger and closer than ever. Today we celebrate in the light times ahead.”

—MARIE MCGRORY, ARTIST



“I was diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer in October of 2019, just after working on The Brushes with Cancer event for Jenna. A year later, in August of 2020, my husband was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer.

After learning about my husband’s diagnosis, I started a fundraiser for research projects that will benefit patients like him living with EGFR lung cancer. I used my contacts in the Philadelphia dining scene and my social media savvy to propel a two-month fundraiser that brought together the public and our hospitality colleagues. We raised over \$100k for two research projects for LUNgevity & EGFR resisters, which are now fully funded for 2021.”

—KRISTINA BURKE, INSPIRATION



“We both believe (and have found from experience) that the more open you are and the more you share your story, resources and experience, the more the universe finds a way to give back to you. Cancer is a daily grind, it’s a constant and relentless battle that requires fortitude, empathy, awareness and hopefulness. But you make connections with people along the way that fill you with a hope or a new sense of purpose. You cannot stop finding joy or sparking joy for others. As much as cancer takes from people, it can be the impetus for realizing how fragile life is, which in turn makes you appreciate small moments which can make you feel whole.”

—JIM BURKE, INSPIRATION
IN LOVING MEMORY



“Love conquers all. And that is certainly the case with my inspirations, Kristina and Jim Burke. Before meeting them in person, I learned that they both were diagnosed with cancer in the past 2 years. Such a situation would be hard for most people to handle, but not for this phenomenal couple who amaze me with their strength, spirit and above all else, love for each other, their children and life and all its moments. When we met, Kristina likened her experience with cancer to being underwater – feeling both weightless and heavy with hopeful light above and unknown darkness below. As she and Jim reminisced about time spent on the coast of Italy listening to Neil Young’s Harvest Moon, I envisioned a painting of them embracing in moonlight. The resulting artwork is layered, starting with their figures underwater – hers on the move, just as she is – his still, with an open ear, listening. Tender and tough, together they will be able to handle whatever comes their way.”

—MAURA MATTHEWS, ARTIST

“INSIEME”

Inspirations: Kristina Burke & Jim Burke
Artist: Maura Matthews

BWC Northeast, 2021

