

The Joy of Life

artwork project at Monash Medical
Centre Moorabbin, Victoria

October 22 - November 5, 2012

Designed and facilitated by
Dr Julie Gross McAdam (MAC.ART)



The original *Joy of Life* line illustration by Julie Gross McAdam



Florence Nightingale

One hundred and fifty years ago, Florence Nightingale, the mother of modern nursing, imputed rapid healing powers in patients to the bright-colours emanating from bunches of flowers she placed in the fever ward. Although she concedes that we know very little “about the way in which we are affected by form, by colour, and light, we do know this, that they have an actual physical effect” not only on the body but the mind too. Nightingale was convinced that a “variety of form and [the] brilliancy of colour in the objects” presents a necessary diversion that has the power to aid patients in a “means of recovery” (Nightingale, 2009, p. 58).

Throughout my years facilitating artwork projects to thousands of participants across healthcare, I have often observed the therapeutic healing power of colour and, in particular, when used in the creation of communal artworks.

Bright pink ladies adorned the lawn of the Monash Medical Centre, Moorabbin, on the first day of my artist-in-residency to mark breast cancer awareness. As I draped the artwork project over my worktable, I watched the waiting room seats quickly fill with women and men from all walks of life. Breast cancer does not discriminate. This year thirteen and a half thousand women and a hand full of men in Australia will receive the diagnosis. More than one of these women sat in the waiting room that afternoon patiently awaiting the news.

Waiting rooms are called waiting rooms for obvious reasons and patients are called patients because everyone is expected to sit and wait patiently. Last years dog-eared magazines hold little appeal for most and unfortunately not much attention is paid to how people feel as they wait with nothing to do. Setting up my artwork project in the outpatient's waiting room, I remember the fear and trepidation as I waited for my own breast cancer diagnosis in 2010. Restless, trying not to worry, but also not knowing how to best fill the time, I wished I had the comfort of a paintbrush in my hand. And, then my mind began to wander. I began contemplating Florence Nightingale and her astute observation of the healing power of brightly coloured flowers. I wondered how the creative arts might be used to good purpose in hospital waiting rooms, and I began imagining possible designs.



The artwork is quite a big canvas. A larger than life figure dominates the centre. Her red lips wear a serene smile, as she proudly displays her pink ribbons. Over the next seven days, more than one hundred patients ensure that dozens of flowers blossom. They open on a field of pink. Rainbow colours - purple, orange, yellow, blue and green - each celebrate the joy of life.

People who have experienced cancer talk to one another in a kind of shorthand, they are often eager to talk to someone about their cancer experience and to make comparisons. This turns my connection with those waiting for treatment and appointments into something special - a kind of knowing. There is a trust and bond between us that is hard to quantify. As they paint, topics range from an intellectual conversation about medieval manuscripts to a simple discussion of an idyllic childhood spent growing up in the Polish countryside. Another tells me how in past times, when his mother was very poor, she liked to crush red petals to colour her lips. We share the joy and sadness of our different life-story experiences.

On the oncology ward, in the visitor's room, the members of a close-knit family are gathered. Staff members speak in hushed tones when they begin to convey the news that nobody wants to hear. It spurs a flurry of activity as family members, one by one, are drawn back again to view the artwork. Sometimes it's just to look at the colours, at other times it is to fill the uncertain hours creating personal symbols and expressions of gratitude, for the life of a loved one lying gravely ill nearby.



On completion permanent communal artworks such as the *Joy of Life* tell a story. They evolve from being, not just another painting exercise, into special and purposeful lasting memorials. The secret of the creative purpose of art is that it not only allows most individual artists to find some extra meaning in life, but such activities also perform the function of creating a bridge between unexpressed inner thoughts and feelings about cancer, and the external reality of the lived survival experience. The experience of painting carries emotional resonance for ordinary people, who are often totally surprised by the result, particularly those who have somewhat reluctantly been turned into artists by the process.

There is always an unexpected surprise for the patient when viewing the final artwork for the first time as well. The finished images have an uncanny way of bringing the patient comfort, pleasure and deep emotional satisfaction. This is because art has the power to give special meaning to the cancer experience that is often confusing, confronting and painful. An often seemingly small contribution carries with it emotional resonance and meaning. The vibrant energy emanating from the work succeeds by drawing in the observer. The patient appears to become absorbed and fascinated by the composition and combinations of colours. This common occurrence is that intangible, life-affirming element, that Nightingale observed and described so long ago. It is that special something that colour and art alone has the ability to inspire.

Communal artwork projects, such as the *Joy of Life*, exemplify how colour and art can be effectively combined and applied, as a “means of recovery” from the trauma of cancer, in men and women, from all walks of life. My hope is that hospital waiting rooms everywhere in the future may be filled, at the very least, with the healing power that emanates from something as simple as a bunch of colourful flowers, but of course, my personal wish for every patient, is for much more.

The *Joy of Life* artwork is dedicated to the memory of my sisters-in-law, Valerie McAdam and Irene McAdam Haigh. I express gratitude to the staff and patients of Monash Medical Centre, Moorabbin, Southern Health, and BreastScreen Victoria. In particular, I extend my special thanks to Gemma Sacco, Sandra Stevens, Lisa Scott and Susannah Taylor for their personal support and assistance to me, and their belief in the *Joy of Life* project from the start.

The Artists

Anita - Samra - Leonie - Rebecca - Catherine - Luke - Susannah - Zarina - Sandra - Carmel - Nicole - Frances - Christine - Julie - Lyn - Kim - Belinda - Salome - Despina - Lisa - Susannah - Faafaalogoifo - Litara - Mary - Rosanna - Chathu - Nadia - Jennifer - Erin - Helen - Chrissy - Wendy - Lisa - Amy - Gurpreet - Kirrily - Coral - Ross - Anne - Fiona - Teresa - Isha - Jo - Alys - Ron - John - Nivia - Margery - June - Mylene - Beverley - Julie - Vivien - Helen - Chris - Deborah - Gemma - Mary - Marley - Amanda - Melinda - Ben - Nicole - Kate - Lisa - Gary - Fred - Maria - Alan- Bernadette - Jessie - June - Sonya - Lucy - Beverley - Iain - Ocksana - Roger - Rhiannon - Lizzy - June - Jodie - Maureen - Peter - Rita - Dean - Jackie - Sue - Jim - Jack - Rosemarie - Bo - Leah - Glenys - Glenda - Sandra - Naomi - Sandi and Julie

References

Nightingale, F. (2009, Ed). *Notes on nursing*. New York: Fall River Press.

