



Cancer Patients Make Life-Affirming Changes at Smith Center



People with cancer and their caregivers find inspiration in art classes at Smith Center for Healing and the Arts.

There are certainties that come with any cancer diagnosis. There will be doctor visits and there will be discussions about treatment options, insurance coverage, and other administrative matters. What can be terribly uncertain, however, is understanding how to go on living life beyond the diagnosis. At Smith Center for Healing and the Arts, people facing cancer learn about healing practices for cancer that explore physical, emotional, and mental wellness and lead to life-affirming changes. Founded in 1996 and located at 1632 U Street N.W., Smith Center believes that everyone harbors enormous resources for inner healing, and it strives to provide tools, techniques and community to help make that possible. Most of its programs are free of charge and Smith Center offers partial scholarship assistance for fee-based programs whenever possible. Smith Center's programs are divided into three areas - health and wellness; education and training; and art and creativity. Activities range from yoga and nutrition classes to support groups and retreats on living well with cancer. Smith Center held its most retreat Oct. 23-25, and here two participants talk about how Smith Center helped them to build positive perspectives and get more out of life. For more information on Smith Center for Healing and the Arts, please visit smithcenter.org, or call 202.483.8600.

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Story by Margaret Rankin

Returning to the Art of Life

Michele Lifshen learned she had breast cancer this year just after her eldest daughter's bat mitzvah. "We were really coming off a big, celebratory time and it just knocked us off our feet," Michele recalls. "I had a bilateral mastectomy in June and began chemotherapy in early September." It wasn't the first time for Michele, who had Hodgkin lymphoma as a child. "Doctors think the breast cancer came from having chemo and radiation treatments to the chest area when I was 10," says Michele, now 47. "I'm at a very high risk for these sorts of secondary cancers because of the treatment I received then." Back then, cancer was a hugely different experience from what it is today, Michele says. "There were no support groups, and no therapy, really, for post treatment," she says. "Okay, you did what the doctor said, you got better, you moved on, end of story." This time, Michele decided she was going to do more than just move on, and she signed up for a three-day retreat at the D.C.-based Smith Center for Healing and the Arts. "I was really searching for some community and for a way to go deeper with my feelings about having cancer for the second time in my life," she says. "I've recently started doing my own writing and getting back into some creative work. I felt like it was going to be a good catalyst to really grapple with the cancer and lead me deeper on my path to self-reflection. I'm so glad that I did." Michele explored her identity as a survivor with other retreat participants during a support group session, searching to figure out what it meant. She knew she had always felt older, and maybe wiser, having come face to face with death at such a young age. "I realized that this little girl in me didn't really have the chance to grieve and go through all those phases



Michele Lifshen works in her home studio on a new piece started while participating in the painting workshop during the Smith Center retreat.

and start going through that healing process," she says. "The result was that I had a little breakdown, but also a breakthrough, and I gave my inner child permission to do that during the retreat." Opening up to her inner child meant that Michele experienced a rush of memories during her time at Smith Center. "I had just recently started losing a lot of my hair and it was distressing and depressing. It brought back memories of when I was 10 and my mother took me wigshopping," she says. "I was so furious— I couldn't cope with it and I didn't deal with it." Michele broke down while telling fellow group members about that experience. "I just started crying when I was telling them— I was finally getting past the pity party. I was realizing that it's going to happen, but it's not permanent, it's temporary," she says. "I also realized how much one's identity really is tied to something like one's hair - the sense of self and beauty, but there are other ways of finding that inner beauty and inner strength." That's when Carole O'Toole, director of the Smith Center's retreat program, offered one-on-one help. "We had a conversation about ritual and what I could actually do to help me with the sense of loss

and make it more meaningful – to be able to manage and cope with the situation," she says. "I wanted to understand what is ritual when you're talking about hair loss. I realized that some of the things I'd already done - taking photos and saving pieces of hair, and how I'm going to incorporate some of these documenting processes in my artwork - that was ritual. It helped me process what was going on." Michele wrote a poem about that experience at the retreat, which she credits for helping to strengthen her focus on art again in her own life. Before her diagnosis, she worked as a preschool teacher in Maryland, but she missed the all-encompassing passion she'd had for her own art as a college student at Brooklyn's Pratt Institute, majoring in fine art and stretching into photography and illustration. Upon being diagnosed in June, Michele quit her Maryland job, which on a good day was a 45-minute commute from her home in Arlington, and she picked up work on her own art while in treatment. Now, in addition to working in a variety of creative media, she's writing a children's book about cancer and considering a position as a studio art specialist - her dream job- at a Reggio-inspired school much closer to home. "Really what I take away is this very strong desire for healing, for taking charge of my own healing every day and for really wanting healing 120 percent. I want to always keep hope, and to keep moving forward," she says. "If you have that positive energy and are focusing on healing and bringing all the things you want into your life, it's going to happen."

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Living in the Moment



Bob Bloomfield and wife Barbara McCann

“You walked out of there feeling a lot better than you did when you went in. When you have cancer most people don't know how to handle it. At the Smith Center, you feel like the staff is working through this with you.”

— Bob Bloomfield

At the end of March, Bob Bloomfield learned that he hadn't had a stroke, as doctors thought. Instead he was suffering from a glioblastoma, a fast-growing, malignant brain tumor. “If you have a challenging disease, you want to find ways to live with it as you attempt to heal it,” says Bob, 64. As part of his decision to enjoy life as he addresses the challenge of cancer, Bob and his wife, Barbara, participated in a three-day retreat offered at Smith Center for Healing and the Arts (smithcenter.org) at 1632 U Street, N.W. The ongoing series of retreats, most recently held Oct. 23-25, provides cancer patients and their caregivers with an opportunity to explore choices in healing that range from conventional medical treatments to mind-body or integrative treatments. They do so in the company of others going through similar experiences. “The retreat was sort of a little miracle in the way that it came together,” Bob says. “Being with other cancer patients and caregivers, I felt heard and understood. And the Smith Center staff treat people as equals and participate in the programs along with the patients. So you really get to know everyone and you're all on the same page.” Particularly attractive to Bob was the fact that the retreat offered a one-stop-shop for different kinds of information and assistance on living with cancer. “I don't think there's anything as holistic as Smith Center. I wanted some compensatory mechanisms, alternative techniques to deal with things like pain, anxiety, loopiness, and imbalance.

And nutrition is part of it — there's a lot you can do with nutrition to not feed the tumor, and my wife attended a cooking class.” He also praises Smith Center staff of experts for their careful scheduling of a variety of activities that includes support groups, yoga, meditation, cooking, creativity sessions, and even a singalong. “It's an immersion thing, so for a whole weekend it gives you a focused way of dealing with something that is present all the time.” All in all, Bob calls the retreat a “transcendent” experience. “You walked out of there feeling a lot better than you did when you went in,” he says. “When you have cancer most people don't know how to handle it. At the Smith Center, you feel like the staff is working through this with you.” Bob continues to attend a support group at Smith Center, which is walking distance from his home in the District. He says he's grateful to them for helping him to maintain a positive perspective on life. “It's amazing, if you deal with your disease in an optimistic manner, how many things you can do at the same time. Certain techniques help you live in the moment rather than projecting stories into the future. You don't want to go down that road too far, you want to stay in the moment to enjoy life.”

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