

Finding the Silver Lining

Art therapy at Salina Regional can help you *manage physical and emotional issues* by using creativity to express emotions **BY BETH VINSON**



Jenny Redmond discovered painting as therapy during treatment for cancer. Now she provides art therapy for others at the Tammy Walker Cancer Center.

She was scared and alone and the world weighed heavily on her shoulders. She needed something to take her mind off the diagnosis she had received, but what? She then pulled out some acrylic colors and a brush and began to paint. It was during this spiritual moment, as she describes it, that Jenny Redmond, a 41-year-old single mother of two, was free to release and express all her emotions on a plain white canvas. Her fears, her anger, her anxiety and stress were beautifully laid out in front of her in her artwork.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

On Aug. 24, 2012, just 10 days into the new school year at Stewart Elementary School in Salina, Redmond, a fourth-grade teacher, received some devastating news.

"It was 11:15 a.m. I was teaching reading, when the phone call I had been waiting for came through," Redmond recalls. "I stepped out into the hall, leaving the class with my other teacher, and took the call. 'It's cancer' is what I heard as I sunk to the floor."

During the following year, she underwent a bilateral mastectomy, along with chemotherapy and radiation therapy. She took a year-long leave of absence from teaching since she couldn't afford exposure to any illnesses. It was during this time that art became her therapy.

Redmond had done a little scrapbooking and crafts in the past, but had never actually painted anything until then.

During her leave, her friends and family rallied behind her with fundraisers, selling T-shirts, and just being there for her when she needed someone. Thanks to that support, according to Redmond, no bills went unpaid that year. Financially, she knew she could never pay back what had been done for her, but she could pay it forward. She hoped other cancer patients might benefit from art therapy just as she had, and she wanted to help others find that same release.

A FAMILIAR PLACE

She went back to the Tammy Walker Cancer Center where she had received chemotherapy and radiation treatment, and presented her ideas to staff.

"This place is wonderful," Redmond says. "I felt safe here when I was going through my treatment so I knew this was where I wanted to pay it forward." The staff liked her ideas, and not long after that, she was standing in front of

NEED A RELEASE?

Information about Jenny Redmond's art therapy and work can be found on her Silver Linings Facebook page at facebook.com/silverliningsart and etsy.com/shop/silverliningsbyjenny. Get the latest information about future art therapy offerings by liking the Tammy Walker Cancer Center's Facebook page at facebook.com/tammywalkercancercenter.



Gerald Karnes shares his painting with the men's cancer support group after participating in the art therapy program at Tammy Walker Cancer Center.

the women's support group at the cancer center, sharing her experience.

"My own personal experience helped me relate to these women," Redmond says. "I know how it feels when you lose your hair. I know how it feels to have to take chemo or to tell your children you have cancer. My experience gave me the strength and knowledge I needed to do this class."

Redmond used step-by-step modeling with the group, which means they would all paint the same picture, but were free to use their own color schemes and details. What began to happen amazed Redmond. "Once we started painting, I noticed that the conversations were more personal and everyone seemed to talk more freely about their individual experiences," she says. "When we were busy doing something, we were more relaxed to share our feelings. Their paintings were reflective of their stories."

She presented her art therapy to the cancer center's men's support group next. At first, the men weren't as receptive to the art therapy concept, but with a little coaching, they started painting and the same results happened with

the men. They began to really open up as they were painting. When asked if they wanted to do art therapy again, they all stated that they would like to. In fact, the men even proudly displayed their artwork in photos taken at the session.

WHAT IS ART THERAPY?

Art therapy is used to help people manage physical and emotional issues by using creative activities to express emotions. It provides a way for people to come to terms with emotional conflicts, increase self-awareness, and express unspoken and often unconscious concerns about their illnesses and lives.

"You don't have to have any painting skills at all," Redmond says. "It's just a release. You just paint and don't even think about it."

WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Redmond is keeping her mind and heart open to where her art therapy takes her. Little did she know when she began this journey that people would be calling her to buy her paintings or to have something custom painted for

them. Nor did she ever think she would be displaying her work at local art shows, but she has several times.

"This was my silver lining to having cancer. If I can share my story and give other cancer patients hope and strength, that will be wonderful," Redmond says. "When I hear the positive feedback during a painting session, I know I must be doing something right." Having to go through cancer or any other traumatic experience can change your perspective on life.

For Redmond, she now sees life as a beautiful, fragile gift that she hopes to share with others through her art. ■

BENEFITS OF ART THERAPY

Seeing and exploring the images you create through art therapy can distract you from health issues and help you:

- Become more self-aware
- Express fears, anxieties and other emotions that may be difficult to verbalize
- Communicate and interact more effectively with others
- Build self-esteem
- Lessen stress
- Improve quality of life
- Find comfort, freedom and hope