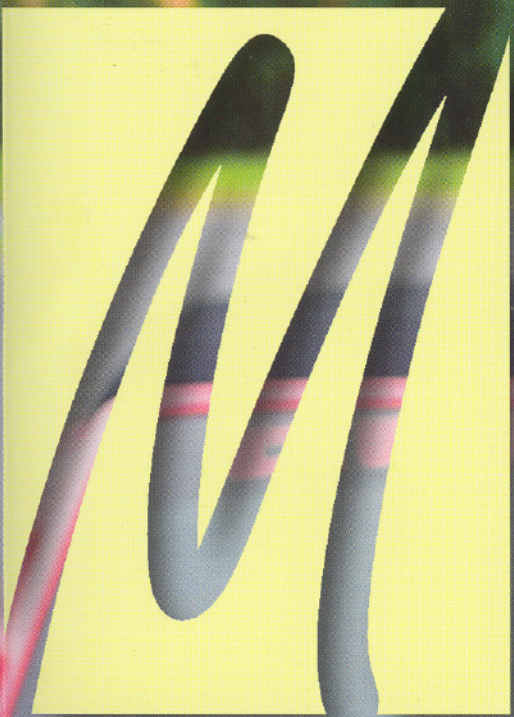


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Brava

For Sue Sigmon-Nosach, art imitates life

BY BEKAH PORTER

Sue Sigmon-Nosach uses her mosaic art as a way to raise awareness for ovarian cancer. Photos by Scott Rogers



The woman sat in the chair and cried. She sobbed not because her disease-ridden body was being pumped with the poison known as chemotherapy.

She wept not because her husband had just lost his battle to his own cancer.

Rather, she shed angry tears as she raged that this sickness had robbed her of more

than her health and her spouse. It had also stolen her financial stability, leaving her unable to pay for her husband's memorial.

Elizabeth Bernstein, an oncology certified registered nurse, watched her patient crumble, and she felt helpless.

"I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to help. I didn't know how to fix it," said

the Northeast Georgia Physicians Group Gynecologic Oncology employee. "So I did what I always do when I don't know where to turn; I called Sue, and she made it happen."

Murrayville resident Sue Sigmon-Nosach never planned on spending her retirement helping widows pay for their loved ones' burials. But she also never anticipated facing

her own death or watching her best friend slip away into the afterlife. And she certainly never expected all of this tragedy to transform her from a businesswoman to an artist and for what started as a creative outlet to be a funding source that would change the lives of hundreds of women.

Despite the odds

In 2004, doctors told Sigmon-Nosach the unbelievable: She would be dead within the year.

The ovarian cancer that had wiled its way into her body would be her demise, physicians said. But Sigmon-Nosach's persistence convinced the medical professionals to push ahead with chemotherapy and aggressive surgical procedures.

While open on the table, surgeons nicked an organ, leading to the dreaded infection known as sepsis. Soon afterward, she laid in a coma on life support. Her husband, Mike, was told to prepare for the worst. Then doctors administered a dangerous medication that caused Sigmon-Nosach to have a heart attack.

"It truly was a perilous time," she said.

But she persevered nonetheless. And although she lost her corporate job, she remained alive, improving daily despite the odds.

To keep herself distracted from her condition, Sigmon-Nosach took an art class, despite having never demonstrated those creative capabilities before.

"A lot of people who go through a cancer journey have turned to art to express the emotions they can't particularly talk out with people, and I think that was my case," she said. "It was a challenge that got my mind off of what was going on."

She dabbled with various artistic mediums, but she discovered her strength in working with broken glass. She took the shards of destroyed items and arranged them in stunning mosaics.

The symbolism was not lost on Sigmon-Nosach.

"Anybody who hears the words, 'You have cancer, is broken. I know I was broken,'" she said. "When you hear that, life as you know it ends, and you don't ever cross back into the 'before' territory. There's life before cancer, and there's life after cancer. And life after cancer, life in that broken place, it can be beautiful, if you let it be."

So Sigmon-Nosach took the remnants of a once complete piece and carefully made them

into something new. Unbeknownst to her, the decision to take that course would alter the rest of her life, albeit a life she didn't expect to be around to enjoy.

'Not going to go it alone'

At the end of 2004, when Sigmon-Nosach was expected to be dead, she instead held a celebratory party to bask in her remission.

Initially, she wanted the event to be intimate and only include the closest of friends. But her husband insisted he be allowed to invite his own close friend who had supported him, as well as that friend's wife.

Again, it was a seemingly insignificant decision that altered the course of Sigmon-Nosach's life.

The friend's wife was Debbie Torbett. At that party, Torbett asked Sigmon-Nosach about the symptoms of ovarian cancer.

Weeks later, Torbett called. She had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer and would start aggressive treatment.

In a short time, the women went from being casual acquaintances who had previously found nothing in common to best friends.

Sigmon-Nosach insisted on accompanying Torbett to her chemotherapy treatments.

"She was not going to go it alone," she said.

Sigmon-Nosach played cheerleader, even going so far as to insist Torbett make art. Then, one night, in a moment that Sigmon-Nosach describes as quite dramatic, she woke in the middle of the night with an epiphany.

"I woke up in the middle of the night, and I said, 'Debbie and I are going to work in broken glass, and we're going to call ourselves 2 Broken Broads, and we're going to raise money for cancer, and our tagline is going to be, 'Broken is Beautiful,'" she said. "And that's what happened."

Startling success

The two women crafted mosaics from recycled material and sold the works at art shows and auctions, rapidly gaining a following. Their success startled them. They began their efforts in 2009, and as of today, they have sold more than 425 art pieces to people in 39 states and two foreign countries.

"As we became successful, we started writing checks to various organizations that were supposedly supportive of gynecological cancers," Sigmon-Nosach said. "And we kept selling, and we kept writing checks. And Debbie kept going to treatments. And as

she sat in those chemo chairs, she never met another woman who had benefitted from any of these organizations that we were supporting, and honestly, it was maddening."

So the two shifted strategies in 2013, instead founding their own nonprofit, The Partnership for Gynecological Cancer Support.

"Our mission was and still is solely to reduce the financial toxicity that a cancer diagnosis brings for a woman and her family," Sigmon-Nosach said. "We give money for such daily noninsured expenses as gas, healthy food, medicine, utilities."

Torbett and Sigmon-Nosach provided various organizations, such as the Northeast Georgia Physicians Group Gynecologic Oncology, with gift cards for providers like Bernstein to distribute to the women who were fighting their cancer battles.

But it soon became apparent that Torbett was losing hers.

'We had to do it'

In 2014, Torbett died, but not before Sigmon-Nosach promised her friend she would continue with their efforts as long as she "had two hands to hold out" and "breath in her body."

So she presses on, spending her days in her studio, putting broken pieces back together.

"Art takes you away," Sigmon-Nosach said. "You just lose track of time. Art gives you that ability, especially if you let your art take you where it wants to go. You can't humanize it, but art is a spirit of sorts, and if you've got that spirit in you, you can go places with it."

For Sigmon-Nosach, those places are knowing that she's making a difference in the lives of people experiencing what she and Torbett did. In the three years since the women formed the nonprofit that gave money directly to cancer patients, more than 500 women have received financial help.

While Sigmon-Nosach and Torbett had originally designated categories for fund dispersal (i.e. utilities, medicines, etc.), as well as limits as to what one person could receive, situations manage to arise that stretch the initial boundaries.

"I had a woman, 32 years old, with three little kids and a husband who adored her, and she had been put in hospice, and insurance wouldn't pay for her pain medication," Sigmon-Nosach said. "It wouldn't pay for the medicine that would help her kids remember

her without pain. So we paid the \$962 for her pain pills. Was it above our budget? Sure. But were we just not going to do it? No. How could we not help her children remember her without pain? We had to do it. We had the money.”

It takes gentle prodding, but Sigmon-Nosach reveals the “we” to which she refers is not new staff at her nonprofit. She is still referring to she and Torbett.

“I can’t help it,” she said. “She has been gone two years, but it’s still ‘we.’ She’s still with me. Truly, she is. This is still our work.”

‘God meant for me to do this’

Sigmon-Nosach wishes her friend would have been able to be cancer-free, as she herself is now. She wishes her friend could have been seen first hand how successful their organization has been.

But she does not wish that her own life had not taken this particular path.

“I never would have chosen to get cancer, but I never would have chosen to not get

cancer. And I mean that with every fiber of my being,” Sigmon-Nosach said. “Cancer has done a lot for me. I can look at it now and see where it has taken me. It has introduced me to people who have hearts bigger than this planet, who have fighting spirits more intense than the Vikings had. Yes, cancer has done an awful lot for me.”

But she is not the only beneficiary.

Bernstein wants Sigmon-Nosach to know that.

“I see an awful lot of women here who get those gift cards to Kroger or who know their medicine is now paid for, and I see the huge impact it has made,” the nurse said. “It’s unbelievable.”

She thinks often of the day when her patient cried, not knowing how she would bury her husband.

“Honestly, I’m not surprised that Sue never mentioned that she made sure that woman’s husband was able to be cremated,” she said. “I’m sure she doesn’t think of it as often as I do, because to her, that’s just who she is,

and that’s just what she does. But to me, that moment was unbelievable, as are the other moments when you know that (Sue’s help) is what gets these women a few more trips to their chemo or the reassurance that there will be groceries in their cabinet. It’s a big deal.”

And for the nurse herself, the knowledge that Sigmon-Nosach is available the next time she encounters an impossible situation is comforting.

“I can’t imagine not having her as a resource,” Bernstein said. “I know that if I have nowhere else to go and no other resource available, I can call Sue, and she will find a way to make it happen.”

To that, Sigmon-Nosach has only one response: “God meant for me to do this. If I didn’t take advantage of this second chance he gave me, what sort of person would I be? No. This is what I’m meant to do. And I’m going to keep doing it, me and Debbie, until we go out of business from lack of need.”

