

The Goldsboro News-Argus

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Spirit in Technicolor

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Published in News on September 7, 2014 1:50 AM

Christy Thompson is crying before she hangs up the phone.

It's bad news.

She asks the members of her art therapy group to put down their brushes.

"It's Ed," she tells them.

The announcement stuns them for a minute, each member taking time to process the loss.

Then, the memories start playing.

They tell the story of how Ed was the first to try abstract painting.

They find comfort in remembering his laugh, his love for his new convertible and above all, his kind spirit.

"That's the hardest part," Christy said. "Falling in love with them and having to let them go."

It is part of the bad that goes along with the good at Soul's Palette. All of those who gather know that there might be an end soon -- a loss of a friend or the loss of their own lives.

Christy has seen many of them lose their battles over the past 10 years.

And getting those phone calls has not gotten any easier.

"In the seventh year, it just kicked me," Christy remembers. "It was breaking my heart."

But the funeral of one patient changed that.

"Her husband came up to me and wrapped me in a hug. 'You cannot quit what you're doing. Do you hear me? You cannot quit doing this.'"

Although each loss hits Christy hard, she cries and continues on. She does it for those who are still fighting, still painting and still living.

And she does it to honor those whose journeys have ended. They are still with her.

It was one of those cancer warriors who inspired Soul's Palette.

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Linda Clark's best friend, Peggy Bill, was in her second round of cancer treatment when her oncologist Dr. James Atkins told her she was at a stage where she should do the things she wanted to do.

She wanted to paint.

"She called me one day and said 'I found someone who would teach us,'" Linda says.

Linda and Peggy began attending Christy's painting classes at her workshop at the Village Green. Then the shop closed, and Christy said she would come to them.

The women started painting in Peggy's kitchen. Dr. Atkins was pleased with the progress and improvement.

"Peggy was so happy with it, she never painted before, but she was a



beautiful artist," Linda says. The three thought how nice it would be to extend the support to others going through treatment.

In 2000, over coffee at Huddle House, Soul's Palette was born.

"The inspiration came from Peggy, but Christy is what drives us," Linda says. "In 2005, we lost Peggy. I lost one best friend and gained another."

Although Linda no longer paints, she helps where she can, making coffee and conversation. Christy says Linda is her right hand. They operate a similar program in Fayetteville and commute between the two.

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Soul's Palette is open to those with chronic illness and caregivers, although Linda says there are other requirements.

"If you're a member of this class, you have to know how to find Christy's glasses and coffee," Linda laughs.

The group meets every Thursday in the Soul's Palette room at the Southeastern Medical Oncology Center office. The room, once a nurses' kitchen, was given to the group. Paints, brushes and artwork fill the tight quarters. Originally all supplies were purchased out of pocket, but donations and fundraisers have helped provide supplies for the program. The group of students ranges from eight to 15 students.

"Sometimes they talk about what they're going through, sometimes they tell jokes and sometimes they just sling paint," Christy says. "When you're dealing with something, it's helpful just to be around people going through the same thing."

Christy flits around the small room, helping with form and offering advice.

She helps Norm Smith with his flower petals. Norm uses his time to crank out canvases for all of his granddaughters. "My daughter says, 'You got to make one for me too,'" he laughs as he lines up two identical paintings.

The 92-year-old claims he just dabbles, and doesn't really paint. He offers moral support to his friends.

"It gets me out of the house and keeps me busy," he says.

A seat away from Norm, Christy stops to talk with Michelle Best, promising to help with the faces in her canvas. Michelle stopped in Soul's Palette one day and never left.

"It's the best thing that's happened. I enjoy it, I just wish it was longer," Michelle says, tracing a beauty shop scene for a dear friend. After Michelle's mother passed away, a friend from church became a second mom. "I am painting this to let her know I love her."

Christy leaves Michelle's side to give Malissa House a reassuring squeeze before lapping around the room again.

Ribbon-winning painter Malissa has been with Soul's Palette from the beginning. She had almost no mobility when she began painting. Linda and Christy worked with her, moving the canvases so she could manipulate the brush. Now she is painting intricate pieces by herself.

"She's kind of a miracle," Christy says.

The students pick out designs, which Christy translates to tracing papers. "It's not about the drawing, it's about manipulating the paints. It's a step-by-step process that is supposed to be fun."

The class doesn't get too caught up with being serious artists. Previous projects decorate the room -- Disney characters, a Dennis Rodman Jesus and a cancer-kicking chicken for Beak Week.

It's not about the final product -- it's about the journey.

Christy has advice for all of her students, "Go to your canvas with no fear, because anything you can do to that canvas can be fixed."

And for many of those who gather, that advice also applies to their own battles -- a series of ups and downs, good news tinged with the fear of the unknown.

Christy remembers those who are gone now, those whose journeys are at an end.

They have left a legacy -- if only the inspiration to keep going for those whose lives have yet to reach a conclusion.

Christy knows she has friends in high places.

"I've got all these angels waiting on me when I get up there," she said.

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