

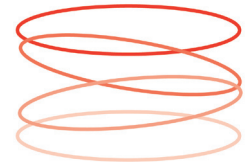
Share, Connect, Heal, Create, Repeat

Brushes with Cancer

BY JENNA BENN SHERSHER; ALANA DUGANDZIC;
AND JACQUELINE CARMODY, LCPC, ATR-BC



TWIST[®]
OUT
CANCER



In 2010, at the age of 29, I had my dream job. After returning from a work trip and a week-long vacation, instead of feeling recharged, my health started to decline. Every few weeks I went to the doctor complaining of flu-like symptoms. First I was diagnosed with viral meningitis, then a pinched nerve. Several months later, I heard the words: “You have cancer.” From that point on, life as I knew it changed. My life was no longer about making plans and saving dates—it would be measured in moments.

My oncologist, Leo I. Gordon, MD, at Northwestern Medicine, initially suspected that I had Hodgkin’s lymphoma contained in the mediastinum. To confirm the diagnosis, he sent a tissue sample to renowned pathologist Elaine S. Jaffe, MD, at the National Cancer Institute, who concluded that I had gray zone lymphoma—a rare and aggressive blood cancer that had features of both Hodgkin’s and non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma.

Throughout my journey, I struggled to find my voice and establish a new identity. I started blogging about my innermost thoughts and feelings and explored what it was like to be a young adult facing a rare cancer. The more I shared, the more the world opened up; my own vulnerability gave others permission to come forward with their stories.


Midway through treatment, although I was desperate to connect with the world around me, my compromised immune system made this increasingly challenging.

One day, I decided to post a video of myself on YouTube and on my Facebook page in which I was dancing to Chubby Checker’s “The Twist” and asked, “Who is joining me on the dance floor?” Within a few days, thousands of people were “twisting out cancer.” These virtual gifts lifted my spirits and provided me with the sense of community that I needed.

After I finished treatment and started the recovery process, I was determined to give back and find meaning in my suffering. I wanted to address the isolation and loneliness that I had experienced, and I was determined to give voice to those whose voices had been stifled by a cancer diagnosis. I tried to imagine how we could create a safe space where individuals touched by cancer could come forward with their story and use the creative arts as a mechanism for healing.

In October of 2011, five months after completing treatment, I founded Twist Out Cancer, an international non-profit organization that provides psychosocial support to anyone touched by cancer through creative arts programming. Since 2011, we have reached more than 18,000 individuals through our signature program, Brushes With Cancer, which matches artists with someone touched by cancer to create unique works of art that reflect the individual’s personal journey with cancer. Over the last eight years, inspirations have ranged in age from 3 years old to 85 years old. The relationship between the artist and the person touched by cancer—the artist’s

“inspiration”—develops over a four- to six-month period. The art created during this time is then displayed at a celebratory event and art exhibition where the stories are celebrated by all in attendance. Since 2011, Brushes With Cancer has been held in Chicago, Ann Arbor, Toronto, Montreal, Tel Aviv, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Austin.

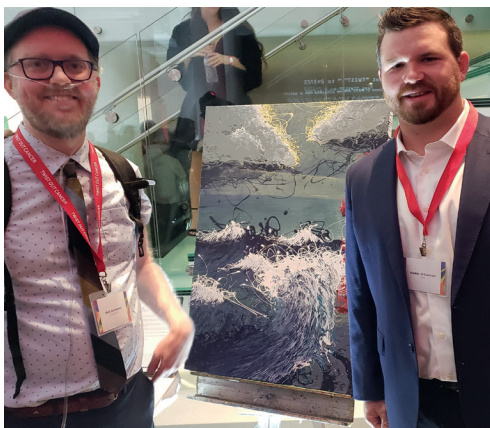
We have seen artists and inspirations fall in love with each other and relocate; change their careers; and have their roles reversed when the artist is diagnosed with cancer him- or herself. A ripple effect occurs after a Brushes With Cancer program ends. The program often serves as a spark to encourage others to share, connect, heal, and create. You just never know who your story may impact. 

Jenna Benn Shersher is the founder and executive director of Twist Out Cancer. She currently lives in Philadelphia with her husband and miracle baby, Noa Pearl. If you are interested in bringing Brushes With Cancer to your hospital and community, contact Jenna at jenna@twistoutcancer.org. More information is available at twistoutcancer.org.



(Top) Photographer Neely Benn (R) and Inspiration Megan Milano (L) at a Brushes With Cancer Gala in Chicago stand in front of the photo Neely took of Megan, who was a caregiver for her mother who died from breast cancer. The photo is titled “All the World’s a Stage.” (Middle Left) At the 2017 Brushes With Cancer gala in Tel Aviv, everyone gathered to see a performance by Inspiration Vital Zinger, a world champion paradancer. (Middle Right) Inspiration Annie Watson (L) and artist Dr. David Turok (R) at the 2018 Brushes With Cancer gala in Chicago, standing in front of the painting David made for Annie. (Bottom) At the celebratory event, the 53 artists and Inspirations at the 2017 Brushes With Cancer gala in Chicago gathered for a photo to celebrate the community they created.





(Top) Inspiration Grace Lombardo (L) and artist Bowen Kline (R) at the 2017 Brushes With Cancer gala in Chicago, standing in front of the painting Bowen made for Grace. (Middle) Inspiration Bret Hoekema (L), a survivor of Hodgkin's lymphoma, and artist Paddy O'Connell (R), standing in front of the painting Paddy made for Bret at the 2018 Brushes With Cancer gala in Chicago. (Bottom) The artwork that was inspired by Alana's journey with cancer. The art piece is based on fear, pain, strength, and courage.

From the Inspiration's Perspective

You've been diagnosed. You deal with the shock the best way you can. You surround yourself with as much love and support as possible, and you face your battle against cancer. With the help of incredible doctors and medical staff, you "win the fight" and you "move on." But how can your life ever go back to normal? What do you do now that you have this "tattoo" of physical and mental anguish?

Sharing your story mends your psyche, allows you to build a community of support, and provides closure. You gain strength, you appreciate life—you appreciate everything.

Brushes With Cancer changed my life. It gave me an outlet to be vulnerable—in its rawest form—and get so much back in return. As an active board member for Twist Out Cancer, I have witnessed the transformation of those hiding from their stories as they grow to truly embrace their narrative.

Both the inspirations and artists walk away from the program with a greater sense of purpose and intention. They become determined to gain an understanding of themselves and inspire others to do the same. As this program continues to grow worldwide, we are honored to have found a gift to give people who have been through hell. We provide them with a way to see the light and take control of what they have lived through. That is what Twist Out Cancer has done for me, and it is what I will continue to do for others.

Alana Dugandzic is a two-time cancer survivor and a past board chair of Twist Out Cancer. She is currently bringing Brushes With Cancer to Austin, Texas.

From the Artist's Perspective

Art therapy is an established mental health profession that uses the therapeutic process of art creativity to improve and enhance the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of people of all ages. Twist Out Cancer engages the cancer community through art and provides tools to enhance the healing process. As a licensed clinical art therapist, Twist Out Cancer has provided me with the opportunity to do what I love in a meaningful way.

As I enter my seventh year as a "Brushes with Cancer" artist, I have been honored to be paired with brave and inspiring individuals each year. Inspirations and artists like myself have unique perspectives and stories to express that help effectively navigate the unknown.

Working with those affected by cancer provides me with a new perspective on life and on how to overcome my own day-to-day struggles. I have learned to appreciate what I have and not to focus my time and energy on trivial matters. The ability to use art-making as a form of communication and storytelling is a one-of-a-kind experience, and words will never be able to express the power it provides. Thankfully, art doesn't require language!

Recently, Twist Out Cancer introduced TwistShops, art therapy group sessions that further liberate participants' personal lives, assist in resolving internal conflicts, and broaden communication and connection with others. This process also helps to reduce feelings of isolation, and it is a process I am proud to be leading. Healing doesn't stop once physical recovery has begun—our stories continue after treatment, and they deserve to be told.

Jacqueline Carmody, LCPC, ATR-BC, is a licensed clinical art therapist and the driving force behind TwistShops, Twist Out Cancer's art therapy workshops.