

living arts



From left: Chris Smith, instructor Brian Moss, Cheryl Downer and Denise De'Orio work on their self-portraits.

Light and Memory

An innovative arts program helps cancer survivors deal with their illness. by Richard L. Gaw

Philadelphia, July 1986: Brian Moss, 23, photographs his partner, Marsha Marritz. In the photograph, her bald head is backlit like a halo, and for an instant, the pain of her illness appears to have yielded to a transcendent peace. Less than two years later, Marritz died after a prolonged struggle with cancer. She was 25 years old.

Wilmington, May 2001: Cancer survivor Cheryl Downer poses for a self-portrait at Sixth and Market streets in Wilmington. Denise DeOrio, also a survivor, positions Downer's camera and exposes the film for 30 seconds. Minutes later their instructor turns the film into a photograph, and both teacher and student discover something wonderful: Downer's face is bathed in beautiful late-afternoon light — not unlike

Marritz's portrait of 15 years ago.

Last spring, Moss, 38, came to Wilmington to help Downer, DeOrio and other cancer survivors preserve their memories and address important life issues through the use of hand-built pinhole cameras and imagination. Moss, a photography instructor at Loyola Marymount University in California, served as artist-in-residence at the Delaware Center for Contemporary Arts, working with members of the Wellness Community of Delaware. An exhibition of their work, titled "Lucid," will be displayed at the DCCA through August 9.

The Wellness Community joins a long line of local community groups involved with DCCA's artist-in-residence program, which encourages innovative artists to infuse community groups

with challenging ideas. Visiting artists have partnered with the Wilmington Senior Center, the Latin American Community Center, Girls Inc., Boys and Girls Clubs, the Christina Cultural Arts Center and others as part of DCCA's mission to make art relevant in everyday life.

"Lucid" is not Moss' first venture into pinhole photography. His "What Helps Dodge Helps YOU" took him to the abandoned Dodge Steel Castings factory in Philadelphia, where he built a 12-foot pinhole camera from parts at the site. The resulting photographs were exhibited in Philadelphia in 1993. He has also taught pinhole photography at colleges in California.

"Uncontrolled creativity" is a fair definition of the unfair art of pinhole photography. Cameras are made from any hollow object that can block light and hold film. A pin prick is then punched into the camera's side, and light is exposed to the film for a time determined by the size of the pinhole and its distance from the film. The machinery is imperfect and exposure difficult to calculate.

It was such imperfection that led to the union of organization, teacher and students. Late last year Moss proposed the idea to the DCCA, then to the Wellness Community. Both groups immediately saw a connection. "Cancer is a person's fight to gain control over something that they are not familiar with," says Sean Hebbel, program director for the Wellness Community. "Pinhole photography and struggling with its simplistic design is a paradigm for what these students are going through in their own lives."

From the moment the class began, Downer knew who her subjects would be. Her trips to chemotherapy were softened by two close friends who drove her to and from the hospital. "I laughed going in and laughed coming home," she says. "I'm taking pictures of them because they both have the largest smiles of any two people I've ever met."

"In the end this class is not about photographs," DeOrio says. "It's about the message that cancer is a shared healing, that the illness doesn't have to be lived through alone — and in this class it wasn't."

Inspired by Moss, Hebbel built his

own camera and joined the class as a clinical liaison. He immediately saw the transformative power of art in Moss' students as they dealt with the physical and psychological changes in self-image that accompany cancer treatment. And he saw that the best evidence of healing was through Moss himself. "Throughout the class, Brian spoke of Marsha in the present moment, as if her memory was part of this class — and maybe it was," Hebbel says. "This is healing in itself."

Marritz was a painter. After having exhibited her work through college, she graduated with a degree from the Tyler School of Art in 1984 and worked as a drafter in a landscape architectural firm while pursuing her art at night. In spring of 1985, she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease. As her illness progressed, Marritz began a three-year journey of the self through narrative art. She made a series of self-portraits, and she created thick landscapes of human figures ascending and descending into heaven and hell. On occasion she asked Moss to drive her to a local cemetery, where she created a series of black-and-white ink wash drawings of gravesites. "However peculiar her choice of subjects, Marsha's artwork was her way of dealing with her pain," Moss says. "Through her art she was saying, 'I have strength and dignity. I am taking control of something I previously had no control over.'"

"From living through Marsha's illness to working with students on the pinhole project, I learned that all art is about conquering mortality. Either as a testament to ourselves or a gift to others, art is making something last longer than we do."

Wilmington, June 2001: With Moss' help, Chris Adams, a breast cancer survivor, takes portraits of her daughter Alyssa, 21, on the steps of the Delaware History Museum. While Alyssa poses, Smith positions her camera, made from an old camera case, on the ground. Throughout the shoot, the talk is of F-stops and exposure, playing with light, judging time, seizing memory.

Cancer is never mentioned. **DT**

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