

Written by Mike Schulz

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“It was awful,” says area artist and performer Pamela Crouch. “The year and a half I went through the whole cancer thing was just awful. The worst thing ever. But I have an amazing husband, I have an amazing family, and I have the love and support of all these people who are available.

“And when they’re *not* available? I have a paintbrush.”

That, in a nutshell, is the concept behind *Living Proof*, the group exhibit – on display throughout the Bucktown Center for the Arts from September 30 through October 29 – that will showcase artistic works, in numerous media, by [more than a dozen breast-cancer survivors](#)

residing between Chicago and Camanche, Iowa. Originally conceived by Crouch and Chicago-area artist Mary Ellen Cunningham,

Living Proof

will be enjoying its second Bucktown exhibition in as many years, and will feature roughly five-dozen never-before-displayed works created by both professional and amateur artists.

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"A lot of times," says Moline resident Crouch of living with cancer, "you're so tired. You're so exhausted. You're overwhelmed and you feel very isolated. And that's what

Living Proof

is about: getting those feelings out in some kind of creative way."

Birdhouses with Pink Roofs

A familiar face with the improv group ComedySportz and in local theatrical productions – with credits including the Harrison Hilltop Theatre's *Sunday in the Park with George* and the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's

The O'Conner Girls –

Crouch was appearing in Playcrafters'

Anybody for Murder?

when she was first diagnosed with breast cancer in the spring of 2008. After two separate surgeries, Crouch began the processes of chemotherapy and radiation, which lasted through the end of October. ("My hair stayed in long enough for my daughter's eighth-grade graduation," she says, "and then I think it fell out the next day.") But in addition to the discomfort and exhaustion, Crouch experienced a rather unexpected, and unusual, side effect resulting from her treatments.

"At some point during chemotherapy," she says, "I lost my nouns. That sounds strange, but I would, like, look at a cup, and I'd *know* it was a cup, but I couldn't say the word 'cup.' I mean, I'm a writer, I'm an actor, and I couldn't remember my nouns? The treatments sort of eliminated those parts from my life. And so you start to feel sorry for yourself."

Possessing an artistic bent beyond writing and performing, though, Crouch sought out a different distraction from her treatments.

"I went to Hobby Lobby and I found birdhouses," she says. "And I started painting the birdhouses with pink roofs, and then with flowers all around them. It was my idea to give them to other cancer patients – people recently diagnosed. And somewhere along the way while doing this, I found out that you *can't* feel sorry for yourself. For one thing, you were doing something for somebody *else*."

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“And for another,” says Crouch with a laugh, “when you’re painting birdhouses with pink roofs, it’s just a *happy* thing. And so that kind of started my own personal art therapy.”

It was through participation in the Quad City Breast Cancer & Lymphedema Support Group that Crouch, in early 2010, made the acquaintance of a woman on a similar journey.

“I met Mary Ellen Cunningham,” says Crouch, “who was living in the Quad Cities at the time. She’s about six months ahead of me as far as her survivorship, but I found out that she was involved with Venus Envy,” Bucktown’s annual showcase of the works of female artists.

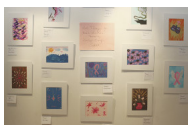
“I literally bounced up to her and was like, ‘Ooo! You’re an artist?’ And she said, ‘Ye-e-es ... ,’ because she didn’t know me yet. And I said, ‘I’m an artist, too! Don’t you think there are other people out there – other breast-cancer survivors – who are artists? We could put on a show!’”

Laughing, Crouch says, “And, in shock, Mary Ellen said, ‘Um ... okay.’ That’s how it [*Living Proof*] started. It was just that easy.”

Making the road to *Living Proof* even easier was Cunningham’s friendship with local artist Jacki Olson, who had a Bucktown studio of her own. “So through Mary Ellen, through *Jacki*

, we got into Bucktown,” says Crouch. “And that was great, because here I was like, ‘Let’s put on a show!’, and I could do all of the organizing things, but Mary Ellen found us a place to have it. Otherwise, you know, we’d be doing it in my backyard.”

Community of Art



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Though designed as a juried art show, Crouch says that the intention behind *Living Proof* was always to feature works by anyone for whom art proved relief from the pressures of living with breast cancer – be they professional artists or, as Crouch says, “people like me. I’m not a professional. I don’t make my living this way. I’m not looking for validation of my work from anybody. But I really

like

doing this. So it’s really for anyone with the courage just to give art a shot. It’s a juried show, but right now, we’ll make room for you.”

After *Living Proof* became incorporated as a not-for-profit, Crouch and Cunningham began soliciting entries from fellow breast-cancer survivors through the local media (including Crouch’s appearance on *Paula Sands Live*), local hospitals, and word-of-mouth, and they eventually found 17 artists interested in showcasing their works in last year’s exhibit. “That’s what Mary Ellen and I were always hoping,” says Crouch. “That we’d be able to reach out and have that community of art.”

And with each artist allowed to submit up to five works each, the pieces featured in *Living Proof* – both last year and this year – have covered practically the entire spectrum of artistic media, from painting to photography to jewelry to journal entries.

“If people submit five, then we accept five, because we think that support is very important. And we include a very wide range of what we consider art, and a very wide range of artists. This year, our oldest participant is 89 years old, a 10-year survivor, and she made this quilt. At 89. And *that*,” says Crouch, “is *Living Proof*.”

As might be expected, numerous pieces on display, according to Crouch, “are very meditative. And some of the pieces are very introspective. I know that in my case, I was always interested in photography and art. But once you’ve been through cancer, the smaller details become so important. It’s almost like a hyper-focus. I really look at art and nature and the world differently, and I see that in other people’s art, too.

“But there’s also this wild, joyful abandon” she says of the spirit behind many works. “Kind of like, ‘Look at this color! Look at *this* color!’ There’s such joy, and there are so many different journeys. It’s amazing to see what these ladies go through, and how the arts have helped them, and how their art has changed with their diagnoses, and why it’s important to them now.

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"All the works, I think, are gorgeous," says Crouch, "because they come from the heart."

Currently in the third year of her own breast-cancer survivorship, Crouch's personal contributions to this year's *Living Proof* exhibit include photographs taken from family vacations, the images having been dyed with sepia tones, matted, and placed in antique frames. "So they're elevated," she says. "My vacation snapshots are elevated to something else. Because I wanted people to say, 'Oh ... you mean that I can take my snapshots and do something with them that's really cool?' I want people to see how accessible art

is

. It isn't scary, you know?"

As Crouch knows from personal experience, it's also something that can also get people through intensely trying circumstances, and one of her goals with *Living Proof* is to share this notion with as many people as possible. Beyond presenting the annual exhibit, the not-for-profit

recruits instructors to teach the value of therapeutic art to local cancer survivors – a recent class was held with the breast-cancer support group at Gilda's Club Quad Cities – and Crouch expects that the organization will soon extend its exhibit-entry range farther into Iowa. ("We think that if we work with the hospitals a bit more," she says, "we can reach into Iowa City. It seems a logical place.")

In the meantime, though, Crouch says that she's more than proud of what *Living Proof* has accomplished locally in just under a year.

"During chemotherapy," says Crouch, "you're up late a lot. At three in the morning, you're wide awake, and you can only clean your refrigerator so many times. So the whole idea behind this [*Living Proof*

] is that during those times, people are able to reach for that paintbrush, or reach for a pencil for sketching, or reach for the clay. You can always reach for something at three in the morning and you can

express
yourself.

"At our support-group meetings, there's a strength and an energy that's just bubbling

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throughout. There's spirit. There's hope. There's a *future*. And that's ... all encompassed in *Living Proof*

. And then we let it spill out onto the canvas."

Bucktown Center for the Arts' opening reception for Living Proof begins at 6 p.m. on Friday, September 30, and the exhibit is on display through Saturday, October 29. For more information, visit

xhibit.com

LivingProofE

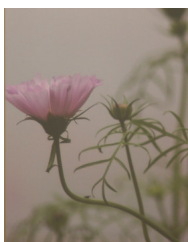
Performing artists are also being sought, through September 23, to share their talents at the Living Proof

opening reception on September 30. For information, contact Pamela Crouch at (309)236-1360 or

cszfam@yahoo.com

Sidebar: Reflections with Six *Living Proof* Artists

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Viewing **Boni Hugunin's** photograph of a pink flower set against a lavender sky, you might wonder whether some sort of color-enhancing process was employed to make the background that exact shade. "No, I know *nothing* about doing that," says the Camanche resident. "Everything I do is what comes out of my camera. I have a camera with me at all times, and I just take a lot of pictures, and hope some of them turn out." A survivor for two and a half years, Hugunin says that, during her battle with breast cancer, she relied less on art than family and friends to help her through. Yet even during her treatments, "photography always gave me something to do, and I saw so many beautiful things around Iowa" – among

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them this nature image captured in McCausland. "I like that one so much I have it hanging in my bathroom," she said. The artist plans to attend

Living Proof

's opening reception, and should be easy to spot when she drives up to Bucktown. She said: "If the weather cooperates, so will my motorcycle," which boasts Hugunin's custom-designed image of a hot-pink breast-cancer-awareness ribbon. "I'm really happy with it."



Though created just last year, the beginnings of Camanche resident **Berdea Hugunin's** patchwork quilt actually originated during the Great Depression. "They couldn't afford much," she says of her relatives during that period, "but they were able to afford handkerchiefs, and so they always exchanged handkerchiefs for birthdays." After the passing of her Aunt Anna, says the 89-year-old Hugunin, "I found all these handkerchiefs that were just lying in a drawer. I just couldn't part with them and had to do

something

with them. And last year, I had a little extra time, so I decided to make a quilt from them." A breast-cancer survivor for 10 years, Hugunin says that the quilt "has a lot of memories for me about family get-togethers when I was a kid," but that she's also pleased to have the work displayed in

Living Proof

, because "those are the things that need to be shared with other people." Pleased, and a little surprised, as the quilt was included at the urging of her daughter Boni, who also has several works featured in the exhibit. Laughing, Hugunin says, "I thought, 'What is she dragging

that

down there for?"



Bettendorf resident **LaNae Ramos'** floral drawing would be striking enough on its own. Yet the work is even more impressive knowing that Ramos created it using the blind-contour method, in which the artist's eyes never leave the image being drawn, and the artist's utensil – in this case, a marker – never leaves the paper. "Continuous-line drawing is something I did when I took art classes a long time ago," says Ramos, a two-year breast-cancer survivor. "And it's so much fun,

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because sometimes it looks like what you're trying to portray, and other times it comes out totally different." After the initial drawing was completed, Ramos says she went back to do additional shading on a half-dozen areas "to make the drawing more pronounced," but she adds that she was pleased with the work even without the enhancements. "Because you never know what the piece is going to look like when it's done. I have a small one that I did that was a paintbrush in a bottle of water, and came out looking like a face in a bottle with a long stick. So you never know."



A breast-cancer survivor for almost 13 years, Chicago resident **Meg Guttman** spent some 30 years working as an actor, singer, and dancer. "But a big thing about going through the cancer treatment," she says, "is it makes you think, 'Okay, what really makes me happy?' And I realized what would really make me happy was to sit in a room by myself with my fabric and my pictures and all of this stuff and

make

something with it." Now a 10-year member of the Illinois Artisans Program, Guttman works primarily in the fiber arts, selling hand-crafted pillows that also boast, as she says, "sort of a toy-like function or a secret or a gimmick." Some of her works displayed in

Living Proof

even come with their own functional accessories, such as the pillow that boasts its own accordion folder. ("I like that you can have a piece of art that you could put your cell phone in.") Guttman does admit, though, that her work can be "kind of a risk, artistically. Because a lot of people look at it and say, 'Whoa! Fifty dollars for a

pillow

?! I can go to

Walmart

and get a

pillow

!"

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“Usually, when I shoot things, I try to find a bit of a different perspective,” says Camanche photographer **Karen Austin**. And her evocative, black-and-white image of her daughter – created with the assistance of “some Photoshop-type things to give it a little more impact” – certainly offers a different perspective, an expression of what its artist terms a “spiritual type of awakening. Sometimes you just *shoot*, but with that one, I definitely had something specific in mind, and knew what image I wanted.” Austin reveals that she’s currently experiencing something of a spiritual awakening herself; during our conversation on September 6, she says, “I just got done with my chemo, and I start radiation next week, so I’m kind of a newbie.” (After a laugh, she adds, “But I guess they say that as soon as you get diagnosed, you’re a survivor the following *day*”.)

But already, Austin understands that art can be incredibly therapeutic. “You need to have some kind of outlet,” she says, “and you need to have something creative to do. It offers some kind of perspective on dealing with what you’re going through.”



Coal Valley resident **Sue Lemmon**’s acrylic *Weeping* is composed of three sections: one

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featuring the image of falling tears, one featuring the image of a blooming sunflower, and one that ties the other images together. "When I had cancer, I was

really

sick," says the five-year breast-cancer survivor, "and when I was lying in bed, one of the Bible verses that were my mantras was Psalms 30:5. 'Weeping may come in the night, but joy cometh in the morning.'" Subsequently, for her acrylic, Lemmon connected her doleful and joyous images with a reproduction of this verse, as a reminder that "while things can seem really bad, the sun is going to rise in the morning, and it's going to be all right." Adding that "if you feel bad, you can just get out your paints and spend four or five hours without having a thought about anything but your painting," Lemmon calls art "a wonderful, wonderful outlet," and urges all novices – as she herself was 10 years ago – to give it a shot. "You may not be a Picasso," she says, "you may not be a van Gogh, but if you paint a flower, and it looks like a flower, and you're

happy

with the flower? Hey. It's

good

."

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