

CAROL PEARSON



Safe refuge from the most evil of diseases

I suppose, if I'm truthful, I thought art therapy was at the nutty end of the treatment spectrum. Art therapy over here, invasive surgery and crash trolleys over there.

How wrong I turned out to be. But let me start at the beginning.

Shortly before Christmas I heard that someone I used to know quite well had died of breast cancer. A clever, funny woman – about my age – lost to her friends and family.

At around the same time a group at the Norfolk & Norwich University Hospital offering art therapy for women with breast cancer got in touch with an invitation to their exhibition at the Forum (see details below). They also mentioned that their funding had been cut and the group was folding.

I thought I would go along and meet them.

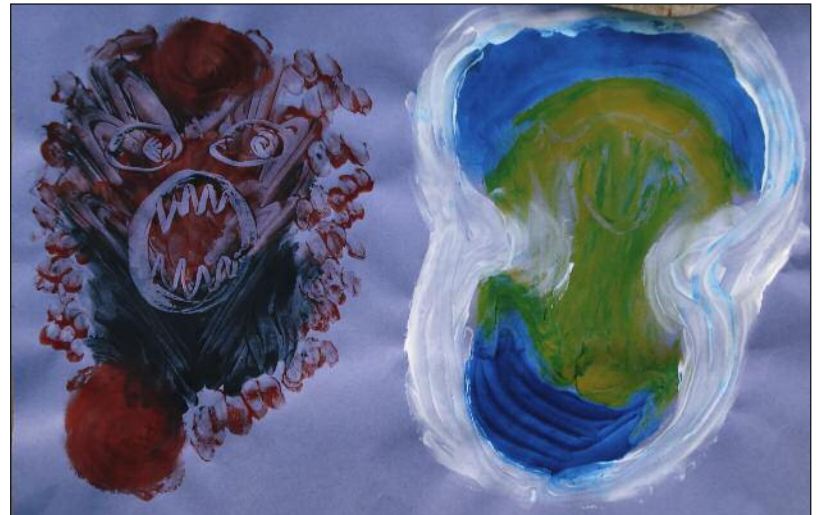
Jo Bissonnet, one of the state registered art therapists who ran the group, is easy to like and easy to talk to. They were set up, she said, because the breast care nurses at the

N&N realised psychosocial support is really important alongside conventional treatment. It was the nurses who found the funding and the Big C that offered the venue.

The group was usually made up of around eight women in various stages of treatment. There was always a waiting list. "Most people are good at hiding their thoughts and feelings behind careful words," Jo told me. "The art therapy group was a place where they could say the things they couldn't say to anyone else."

Everyone I met commented that most of the women saw themselves as 'not very creative'. Yet here they could express what was happening to them. The exhibition has some very powerful images.

Catherine attended the group earlier last year and lives alone. "Just two hours each week but it gave my life a structure. It got me through. My friend in the Midlands says there's nothing like it there. Where she lives you're treated and



STRUCTURED LIVES: Two of the paintings from the art therapy group for women at the Norfolk and Norwich University hospital.



then left on your own."

As it happens, the N&N has an outstanding reputation for the treatment of breast cancer. Long-term survival rates are some of the best in the UK. I can't help feeling the art therapy group has been part of their success.

The funding required is only £8,000

a year which covers two qualified psychotherapists, equipment and a venue.

"We offered a safe refuge at a frightening time," said Jo sadly.

■ **The exhibition runs for a week from January 8 to 14, 2010, from 9am to 5pm, at the Forum in Norwich.**

HELEN'S STORY

"I was diagnosed with breast cancer after a routine screening at the N&N. That's how most women I've met seem to find out. In fact, I'd urge everyone to go to their screening appointment because finding out early, like I did, gives you the best chance.

"Anyway, I got a letter asking me to come back to the clinic and I opened it and went completely cold. It was a Saturday morning and the appointment was for Tuesday so I knew it was serious.

"The letter said only one-in-ten recalls turned out to be for something

malignant but I knew, I just knew I was going to be the one-in-ten... And I also knew I was going to die. Absolute certain fact. On top of that my husband was away on business so I didn't tell anyone and I went on my own to the appointment.

"I couldn't fault the N&N. They were the nicest they could possibly be. They did a biopsy and once it was confirmed I had the lump removed but that didn't work so then I had to have radiotherapy which was dreadful. Exhausting.

"I was given a breast care nurse who was at the end of the phone when I

needed her and I've got lots of friends who were very, very supportive but in the end I was on my own with this. It was finding the art therapy group that made all the difference.

"I was used to being in control and suddenly things I couldn't control were happening. I was in the N&N's system and I felt powerless except for two hours a week at art therapy.

"It was safe. I could say the unsayable. I could be a hurt, sad frightened person without burdening my family.

"We'd talk at the start, a sort of catch up session and for the second hour we'd paint in silence. I really appreciated that. I used to get quite annoyed with people who talked. It was very private.

"How are things now? Well I've had a six month all clear which feels like grounds for cautious celebration. Cancer has made me take stock, decide what matters. It spurred me on to visit my daughter in New Zealand, for example.

"Art therapy helped to get me through the last year and gave me different tools for the different life ahead. It's really sad that it won't be there for other women in my position."