

11 May 2016

Symbols of pain become beautiful artworks

Cancer survivors are now finding meaning in their radiation masks after treatment thanks to an art program at Liverpool and Macarthur Cancer Therapy Centres. When patients have cancer near their throat region they often require a mask that keeps their head still during radiotherapy; so that the treatment can be delivered accurately.

Some patients connect the mask with a form of lifesaving treatment while others would prefer to never see their mask again. Liverpool and Campbelltown Hospital Director of Radiation Oncology Dr Dion Forstner said the Cancer Therapy Centres had found a powerful purpose for the masks by turning them into pieces of art that will be exhibited at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in June.

“Patients with head and neck cancer who have completed radiation treatment often have mixed feelings about their radiation masks,” Dr Forstner said.

“For some people, seeing a mask that reminds them of radiation treatment can understandably be quite distressing but by taking this source of pain and turning it into an art work, we’re empowering patients in remission to take something gloomy and turn it into something powerful,” he said.

Opening on Friday 10 June and running until Sunday 12 June, the Cancer Therapy exhibition Bravery Unmasked will breathe life into radiation masks that were previously used for cancer therapy treatment.

Dr Forstner said he was thrilled to have throat cancer survivor, ambassador for Targeting Cancer and journalist Julie McCrossin enter her work in the upcoming exhibition.

“We are very excited to have such a passionate cancer advocate be a part of the exhibition and to share her story and journey through art,” Dr Forstner said.

The former ABC broadcaster, Ms McCrossin said there was no better way to celebrate her 3rd anniversary of beating cancer than by turning a bland and morbid piece of plastic into an object of beauty and meaning.

“When you’re restrained by this mask, you’re kept very still and I found that to be quite a hard experience, but this workshop has helped make peace with the mask,” she said.

Radiation masks are white, mesh face moulds are reminiscent of fencing masks and can cause many traumatic thoughts for patients past and present. It is for this reason that Ms McCrossin said she was inspired to make a positive piece of art so others going through treatment could remain courageous, calm and strong.

“I received some valuable advice from a clinical psychologist that really helped when someone was trying to get a cannula in for chemo or trying to bolt my head down with an unusual mask. She advised that if I think of the obtrusive thoughts as fluffy clouds that are floating into my peripheral vision, and not to push them away but to gently blow them away. This has been the inspiration for my painted mask which I’ve entitled head in the clouds,” Ms McCrossin said.

Patients are given the opportunity to work with art therapists from the Casula Powerhouse who've helped to transform their radiation masks into masterpieces. Wellness Program Manager Cancer Jan Heslep said the feedback about the workshops so far has been positive.

"We are currently running bi-monthly workshops with participants who are assisted by a number of talented artists from the Powerhouse in generating ideas and completing their projects. Materials are provided and no art experience is necessary," Ms Heslep said.

"Some people may think it is extreme to decorate and hang up a radiation mask, but we've had positive feedback and are expecting a large amount of people to come to the exhibition," she said.

Bravery Unmasked exhibition:

- **What:** Bravery Unmasked pop up exhibition.
- **When:** Exhibition opening night on Friday, 10th of June from 5.30pm – 7.30pm, Exhibition opens to the public on Saturday, 11th of June from 10am – 5pm, Final day of exhibition on Sunday, 12th of June from 10am – 5pm.
- **Where:** Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre Performance Space, 1 Powerhouse Rd, Casula.

Bravery Unmasked workshops:

- **What:** Bravery Unmasked sessions are held monthly according to demand.
- **Time at Liverpool:** Friday 13th May from 10am to 12pm at Liverpool Hospital Lvl 1 Wellness Centre, Friday 20th, 21st, 28th May from 10am to 12:30pm at (Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre).
- **Time at Campbelltown:** Friday 27th May from 10am to 12pm (Campbelltown Hospital Lvl 1 meeting room in Building D (enter through Building F)).
- **Contact:** Jan or Melissa: 8738 9808; 0476821659.