

Illness Inspires Courage, 'Unexpected Blessings'

New Jersey's Roxanne Black has helped thousands of people, following a serious illness that began in her teens

BY TRACY ECCLESINE IVIE



In the corner behind Roxanne Black's desk is an unusual red and white collage she made from chipped china plates. Not only a striking piece of art, it's also an ironic metaphor for her life: something beautiful made from something broken.

At 38, Black is a woman who knows a lot about putting the pieces of life back together – and transforming them into something meaningful. An athletic teenager who was struck down by lupus at 15, she's had two kidney transplants since then and has been in and out of so many hospitals that sometimes they all blur together.

Another blow came in her mid-twenties when she suddenly lost her mother to an asthma attack. Over the years, however, Black has found many ways to cope.

Healthy since her second transplant at age 35, she turned her illness into something positive while still a teenager by founding Friends' Health Connection (FHC), a support network that matches up people with health challenges so they can share information and friendship.

Recognition for her organization has been phenomenal. She has met two presidents, won numerous awards and been featured on CNN and in such publications such as USA Today, Ladies' Home Journal, Seventeen, Family Circle and Prevention. Not only that, Oprah did a TV segment on some of the people who were "matched up" through Black's organization.



Roxanne Black with President George H. W. Bush and Barbara Walters

FRIENDS' HEALTH CONNECTION

Headquartered in New Brunswick, FHC grew out of a lupus support group Black started at 15 when she was a “powerless, lonely and desperately ill teenager” who urgently wanted to connect with people who could understand how the disease was affecting her life.

She remembers going to a supermarket with friends and falling down in the parking lot because she couldn't keep up. Too embarrassed to call for help, Black crawled to the nearest parked car, preferring to risk her life than admit to any vulnerability. Once inside the store, she realized she hadn't even been missed.

By the time Black graduated from high school, her support group had grown to about 200 people. As a scholarship student at Rutgers University, she began focusing on a new idea, a personalized service that would match up individuals with the same illness (not necessarily lupus) who were the same age with similar symptoms and even hobbies or interests. The goal was “to make sure that everyone has someone who could understand – truly understand – what they're going through.”

When USA Today ran a story about her idea, Black was bombarded with letters from around the country. “Suddenly, there was no time to be sick,” she says. “I had a purpose.”

And thus began Friends' Health Connection, which now reaches caregivers as well as people with health challenges from all over the world. “It's kind of like a dating service, but not for romantic purposes,” says Black. “It comes down to people helping people.” FHC is also an educational resource and a national speakers' bureau for hospitals and nonprofit organizations. (See sidebar.)

AWARDS, BOOK

The awards and letters in Black's office tell the rest of her story, including a photo of her with former President G. W. H. Bush, who named her a spokesperson for the Youth Points of Light program. He occasionally sent her get well letters and also did a public service announcement for Friends' Health Connection.

Her recent book, “Unexpected Blessings. Finding Hope and Healing in the Face of Illness,” chronicles Black's life and how she coped with so many challenges. On the cover are words of praise from no less than doctors Deepak Chopra, Mehmet Oz and Bernie Siegel.

FRIENDS' HEALTH CONNECTION

www.friendshealthconnection.org
800.483.7436

Key programs include:

A free online service that connects those who are ill – or their caregivers – for mutual support, friendship and hope. To join, people fill out confidential questionnaires and link up with others who are experiencing similar challenges. People can correspond anonymously through the FHC Web site until they feel comfortable communicating in other ways.

Many FHC “matchups” have become close friends and call or e-mail each other every day. One woman even named her daughter in honor of her friend.

A national speakers' bureau for fundraisers. Many of the events include book signings, with past speakers including Barbara Walters, the late Christopher and Dana Reeve, Ed Begley Jr., Dr. Andrew Weil, Debbie Phelps (mother of Olympic champion, Michael Phelps) and Jenny McCarthy, who is a leading spokesperson for autism awareness.

Online educational information, including free audio and video content on a variety of health and inspirational topics. The center also has an online bookstore with autographed books from various speakers.

Donations for Health (www.donationsfor-health.org), designed to help meet patients' personal needs totaling \$150 or less, such as taxi rides to hospitals, car seats for new parents who can't afford them and meals for families of people who are ill. Black is coordinating requests through hospitals, churches, temples and other organizations; and anyone can donate all or part of the money needed for each request.

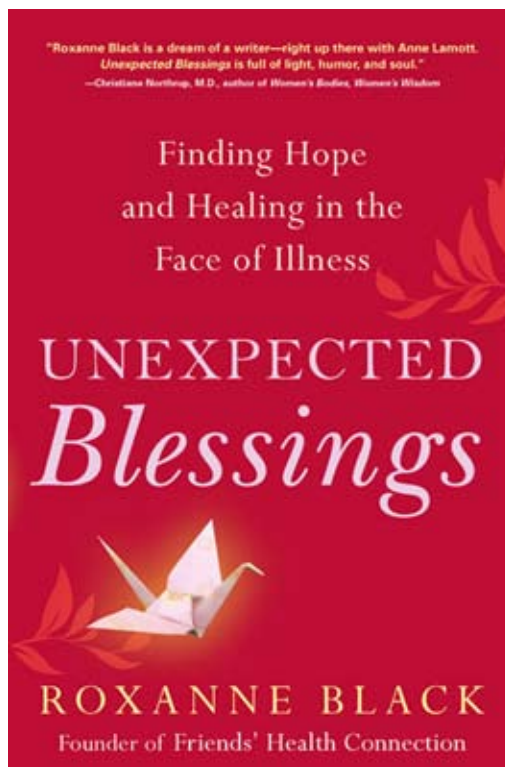
"No one wants to be sick or injured," she writes. "But at some point in life, these crises happen to all of us. The challenge is to discover the blessing buried in adversity, the little jewel embedded in the rock." People who have to cope with serious illnesses "find treasures of strength, insight and courage we never knew were there," she says.

Black has been on the receiving end of many kindnesses, including a doctor who walked her home from the emergency room when she was in college, assuring her that everything would be all right even though she'd just been told to report to a kidney center in Philadelphia immediately.

While trying to put together her fledgling organization in college, she received her first donation: a roll of stamps and a box of envelopes to help answer the many letters from sick people who wanted to be matched up. The donor told her to contact him whenever she ran out. Another person bought her a copier for \$750. "I didn't have two nickels to rub together when I was a college student," she recalls.

GRANTS

After graduation, Johnson & Johnson gave her a grant of \$30,000 to help make New Jersey hospitals aware of her organization. A three-year grant of \$650,000 from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation followed, as well as tutorials from a woman at the foundation who taught the younger woman the art of writing grant proposals.



For information, visit www.roxanneblack.com


One of Black's most memorable kindnesses came when she was in a hospital for more than a week. "I was feeling down," she says, adding, "You start going stir crazy." Every day a cleaning woman came into her room and gave her strength, humming "Amazing Grace" under her breath while working. "And afterwards, she just looked at me and smiled and said a little prayer with me. She was the highlight of the day," says Black. "I would look so forward to her visit. And I'll never even know her name...but she touched me in the deepest way.

"When you do for others, it comes back to you a thousand fold in ways that you would not imagine," she says, adding she never thought she would end up "meeting all these amazing people and experiencing so much in life."

As for the future of Friends Health Connection, Black wants it to be-

come known as a leading educational resource for patients and caregivers. "I think we're on our way there," she says.

"I've always been very determined, because if I have a vision, I see it so clearly," she says. "I don't always know the way to get there, but I see the end result I'm going for, and once it becomes alive in me, I just have to make it come alive in reality."

Whether she's talking about the crafts projects she dabbles in or her life's work, one thing is certain. Black's vision has proven to be strong, enriching the lives of so many who have come in contact with her. 

UPCOMING EVENTS INCLUDE:

September 15, 7 p.m.
"Colorectal Cancer: Preventable! Beatable! Treatable! With Dr. Durado Brooks"
 Somerset Medical Center

September 17-19
Well-Being Retreat
 Van Etten, New York (Finger Lakes region)

October 24
Dr. Larry Dossey, 1-3 p.m. and Mariel Hemingway, 4 to 6 p.m., 2009 Mind Body Spirit & Living It Green Expo
 King of Prussia, Pa.

November 19, 7 p.m.
Sean Swarner, "Keep Climbing: How I Beat Cancer and Reached the Top of the World"
 Somerset Medical Center

Ellie Krieger, Food Network
"So Easy: Luscious, Healthy Recipes for Every Meal of the Week"
 November 19, 7 p.m.
 Hunterdon Medical Center
 November 20, 7 p.m.
 Robert Wood Johnson Hamilton Center for Health & Wellness