

# Artists evoke battles for life

By Jennifer Mann

Staff Writer

Rachael Wilcox was 7 years old when her mother Shirley was diagnosed with cancer of the spine. Over the last 20 years, she has watched her mother battle the disease and conquer it.

Now, with her artwork, she hopes to reveal pieces of her mother's story, and that of others: demonstrating that hardships can make a person stronger; that cancer can both overwhelm and inspire; and that talking about the disease does not change reality, but can certainly make it easier to cope.

Shirley lost the use of her legs when the tumor in her back erupted and caused nerve and cell damage. But at age 65, she has found ways to work around the obstacle and is living an active life.

"My mother is a very strong person," Wilcox said. "She does more than people who have their legs completely intact ... That kind of made her a hero to me in many ways."

Her mother's struggle became an inspiration for the exhibit, "A Life After Cancer," which is open for viewing at the Arlington Center for the Arts, at 41 Foster St., through Feb. 24. A reception for the exhibit will be held Saturday, Jan. 21, to benefit the American Cancer Society.

"I realized that my mother wasn't the only hero," explained the Newton artist, who works primarily with ceramics. "What I was trying to do with these exhibits was to try to raise as much awareness as possible about cancer, and also raise as much awareness as possible about life."

After receiving a grant for the project from the Museum of Fine Arts, Wilcox paired with Boston painter Stephanie Angelo to present the stories of 10 individuals who have fought cancer during their lives: Some have won the battle; others have lost.

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Courtesy photo

Stephanie Angelo hangs her artwork in an exhibit, "A Life After Cancer," at the Arlington Center for the Arts.



# Survivors inspire artists

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Angelo, whose own mother was diagnosed with cancer nine years ago, has painted the portraits of famous women in history who lived with the disease. What was interesting about portraying the well-known personalities, she said, was the glaring contrast between the glamour of their lives and the darkness of the disease within them.

"You kind of see the different dynamics of what a cancer diagnosis can have," she said, emphasizing these women proved that receiving the diagnosis does not translate to "a death sentence."

In addition to the current exhibit, the 25-year-old artist has been focusing on art that incorporates a female point of view with religious topics.

For "A Life After Cancer," Angelo intertwines the bright flat colors and bold lines of her acrylic work with paper cuttings and collaged elements. In one piece, titled "Shirley," representing the actress and singer Shirley Temple, a quote is displayed prominently across a portrait of the child star, slightly obscured by pink and silver ribbons that tumble from above.

"I was one of the fortunate actresses in Hollywood who didn't wear falsies, because I didn't need them," it reads with dry humor. "I felt pretty good before the operation, and I felt good afterward, I just lost a good friend in between."

Wilcox, 27, based her pieces on interviews with four women and one man, all of whom had their own perspective on life with cancer. The artist sculpted portraits of each individual with stoneware, displayed on Plexiglas. Below each display is a CD player, with recordings of each talking about life with the disease.

One of those subjects was her mother.

"She was probably the hardest person to interview, because I know her," Wilcox said. She added the sharing was good for both of them, even though it drew difficult memories.

"I had gone through part of it with her, but there were other things I didn't know."

But there was inspiration within the memories — like when her mother started walking the halls of the hospital, as well as she could without the use of her legs. Fellow patients soon joined her, and they continued to perform the daily ritual, long after she no longer could.

"If you could fight back, you always had a chance," Shirley's steady voice recalled, filtering out from the speakers below her sculpture.

Shirley called herself "a cancer conqueror," rather than a cancer survivor. She talked about re-evaluating her life, after making it through the many rounds of chemotherapy and rehabilitation.

The mother of three began to volunteer, and today still serves on the board of visitors for the Central New York DSO, an agency that provides support and services for individuals with developmental disorders.

"One cannot sit around and worry about oneself," she explained. "You have to get out there and do as best as you



Courtesy photo

Stephanie Angelo (left) and Rachael Wilcox stand in front of their artwork, which is on display at the Arlington Center for the Arts through Feb. 24.

possibly can — and that is giving to other people — you get back 100 percent more."

At another point in the room, there is a sculpture titled "Dana."

Dana is revealed to be a 28-year-old female, who was diagnosed with a malignant melanoma in her groin two years prior to the interview. As a dancer, she talked about how rounds of treatment left her too tired to move some days. The illness allowed her to realize the things she had

previously taken for granted, she said, such as her dancing and relationships. It was a theme repeated in several others' messages in the room.

"Work doesn't take precedence, because it's not the most important thing... Family and friends are," she said, her voice breaking.

In the interview Monday, Wilcox explained Dana passed away one year after the recording was created. She has given Dana's family a copy of the CD and a reproduction of the

sculpture.

"They have that piece of her that they can hold onto," she said. "I think that's important."

"A Life After Cancer" is at the Tufts Street Gallery within the Arlington Center for the Arts, 41 Foster St., now through Feb. 24 (781-648-6813). The artists will hold a reception this Saturday from 5 to 8 p.m., with 30 percent of proceeds benefiting the American Cancer Society. There is a \$10 suggested donation.