

The Colors of Healing



Ask anyone who has met Mary Nance, what color comes to mind when they think of her, and chances are they'll tell you, "yellow," for the beads she wears on the shell necklace she made. Or perhaps, "pink," for the pink dress she often wears when speaking about cancer in front of people. Or "no, wait," they'd say, "it's blue and red, with some green thrown in," for the quilts she makes for cancer patients. One thing is for sure, whatever color they think of, it is certain to be related to cancer education and the importance of early detection.

Mary Nance believes that color carries emotion and creates a language between people that anyone can understand.

"Wearing traditional regalia in my new designs allows me to tell my cancer story," she says. Sharing her story is what she does best—at any kind of gathering, be it church groups, support groups or conferences. "At times I am a walking conversation piece."

Mary, of Hispanic and Kickapoo Tribe descent from Eagle Pass, Texas, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2000. She was just 46 years old.

Before having cancer, self-exams and annual checkups had always been important to Mary. That's because when she was 19 years old she had a scare. After some discomfort in her left breast she went and had an exam at the Indian Health Service clinic. She was told that she needed minor surgery. Three small tumors were removed. The good news was that they were not cancerous.

Just the same, Mary remembers how frightening it was when she signed a form saying it was okay to remove her breast if cancer was found. "That was a nightmare," she says. Though she worried whenever it was time for another exam, Mary knew that the best way to stay one step ahead of cancer was to go to her annual checkups. The idea was that if cancer ever happened the best way to fight it was to find it early and treat it sooner.

And one day it did, in 2000.

Mary was at the Police Academy in New Mexico when she discovered the lump that, after testing, proved to be cancer. "It had a hard woody feel to the touch. My bra caused so much discomfort to

the area." The lump was underneath her left breast, below her bra line.

"I was working 12-hour days and all I could do was rub or massage the area all day long to relieve the discomfort." She went home to Casa Grande, Arizona to see the doctor. Testing revealed she had Stage II breast cancer.

"The first thing I did when I went to see the oncologist was to ask him, point blank, whether he believed in God." He assured Mary that he did. "Then I told him I also believed in the healing power of herbs in combination with western medicine."

Mary agreed to tell the doctor everything she was doing so that the traditional medicines could work with treatment, not against it. Mary comes from a line of curanderos, people who heal with natural

continued next page



Mary Nance is the head of a local chapter of a cancer survivors organization called, Native People's Circle of Hope, in Casa Grande. She is seen here with Katherine Quartz, (Northern Paiute), getting ready for a presentation.



“Pink is my personal story on breast cancer,” Mary Nance says.

Mary Nance from previous page

medicine. As a child Mary’s mother used to take her on walks to gather plants. Her mother reminded her often to be very careful when gathering medicinal plants, because they were able to give back life, she said. As a result, Mary knows that without the right knowledge, some traditional medicines could make chemotherapy treatment harder. But understanding herbs, and sharing with the doctor what was being done, could bring her comfort and aid in healing—be it physical, emotional, or spiritual.

The surgeon performed a lumpectomy, which is the removal of the lump, not the breast.


After surgery, Mary had chemotherapy treatment, and then radiation, which was very difficult. Mary says she could not have kept up her spirits without the support of her family, friends and children. “My son John was the main care giver from the beginning of my diagnosis.” Her other children, Bryan, Annie, and Julie, also provided Mary with the support she needed. “Above all, I give credit to my Creator,” she says.

Today, Mary is still cancer free. She is also still faithful to her exams, though she’s had a few more scares along the way. Recently she had a swelling of the lymph nodes and discomfort around her neck area. It scared her, but tests showed she had nothing to worry about. So in many ways, she says, tests are also about peace of mind.

In the nearly ten years since her diagnosis, quilts have become another, powerful way for Mary to show gratitude for the life she has been given. Making quilts was a necessity as a child. Later in

life, and with the help of her mother-in-law, Anna May Nance, she learned the art of quilt designs. Soon a vision of making quilts for cancer patients and survivors had begun. She and a group of volunteers make as many as 200 quilts a year for cancer patients and longtime survivors. The quilts are distributed locally and nationally to American Indians and Alaska Natives through Native People’s Circle of Hope. Mary is the head of a local chapter in Casa Grande.

Support to other survivors, grief for those who have passed on, and gratitude for her own life, continue to take on new colors and form. Mary has dresses in pink, and yellow, and has plans for a blue one, too. (Mary’s dresses are sewn by her friend and seamstress, Judy Brattly.) Her jewelry also has meaning. “Through my jewelry I weave my children’s contributions.”

“The yellow beads are hope,” she says. “Turquoise is my son, my caregiver, his love and tears for mom. The seashell represents water, life. The red beads are for my bloodline, for my children and a symbol of the preservation of life. Red is also my passion for the next generation to come. It is my passion for my son, my two daughters, and two granddaughters. These are my reasons for living.” 



Quilts made by Mary Nance and others are a caring way to show support to cancer survivors.