

'Warrior Women' seek healing through art



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A unique group called Waking Dreams and Warrior Women has been exploring the healing effects of art. The group's focus is and has been on breast cancer, but the members feel art has the potential to help with all types of illnesses.

Dr. Bethe Anne DeLuca-Verley, a breast cancer survivor and a founder of the organization, was diagnosed with the disease two years ago when she was breast-feeding her third child. She was given a grim prognosis, underwent intensive chemotherapy and eventually had a mastectomy.

Verley said Waking Dreams and Warrior Women began last September during a discussion in her living room with physicians interested in the impact of art on healing. Also present was sculptor Christiane Corbat, who was already using art with heart and breast cancer patients to help the healing process. Corbat approached Verley about doing a body casting of her before and after her mastectomy, which she says "let me see myself outside myself."

Verley feels art creates "almost sacred space." When people are doing art they don't feel vulnerable as they might in a doctor's office -- they can discuss and explore illness, death and dying more comfortably.

The goal of Waking Dreams and Warrior Women is not to create an alternative to traditional treatment but to offer spiritual healing as well.

People seem drawn to the concept. Verley says the group is growing quickly. The nonprofit organization incorporated in February. While it is based in Rhode Island, it has board members across the country as well as international representatives. The group is filling a void in medicine, Verley says. Art therapy is complementary care that helps improve the quality of life, she says.

Brown University Medical School has given the group a grant to work with medical students to help them explore other aspects of healing.

The group also plans to go into schools to talk to students about school violence. Verley says they are considering helping the students do hand castings because "hands are so

reflective of everything that we do." After the students decorate the hands, they can be connected to build a bridge sculpture showing how they are individuals, yet connected.

A Paleolithic figurine has become the symbol of Waking Dreams and Warrior Women. It is called Nuit and was used in Greece and Algeria more than 4,000 years ago to help people who were sick. Verley says though it was picked at random, when they learned its meaning, group members thought it very appropriate. According to history books, Nuit was considered the goddess of the soul, related to fertility and the gateway to dreams. "It gives testimony to the journey," says Verley.