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Connection made between art, healing

Home News Tribune Online 01/13/08

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NEW BRUNSWICK — Seventh-graders cranked up their creative impulses to benefit children with brain cancer at an art workshop on Saturday.

More than a dozen students painted and glued collages in the event organized by the newly opened Alfa Art Gallery and the Beez Foundation. The artwork was created around the theme of hats, a reminder that cancer treatments often cause patients to lose their hair.

Susan Giardina, co-founder of the Beez Foundation, lost her daughter to brain cancer in 2001. "We found one of the best ways to channel our grief was to do something positive," she said.

She and her husband formed the Beez Foundation, giving it her daughter's nickname, to raise funds for research and education. In the last five years, they've given out more than \$100,000 in seed money to scientists developing innovative treatments for pediatric brain cancer.

Brain tumors are the leading cause of cancer death in children and young adults, according to the Brain Tumor Society.

"When she was going through treatment she lost her hair and it was absolutely devastating to her," Giardina said of her daughter.

The foundation invited children from the area to Saturday's painting workshop in preparation for an auction fundraiser next month. The Alfa Art Gallery, a new addition to Church Street, joined in the project to help make the connection between art and healing. The gallery's resident artists have each donated a painting for the auction.

Alexis Varga, 13, dabbed her brush in a palette of watercolors, swiping yellow into a large sun in the background of her painting. A girl with flowing black hair floated in the foreground. "She's thinking how nice it would be to be up in heaven with God," said Alexis, a seventh-grader from Middlebush.

Her classmate, DeAnna Daley, 12, sketched out an angel in pencil before adding color.

"I'm drawing an angel because angels guide people and I thought that would make the kids feel better," she said.

Resident artist Mike Fenton, of Parsippany, helped DeAnna shape the angel's wings. "This kind of touches home because a couple of my friends died of brain cancer," he said. "I have an instant emotional connection."

Fenton said he joined the project to promote art as an outlet at difficult moments in life.

"I learned fairly late in my life of the therapeutic value of art," he said.

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