Breast cancer patients learn to love themselves again

Arts Medicine uses music, dance, drawing to help women cope with illness

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A dozen women in a dimly lit room listen intently to Middle Eastern music, moving their bodies tentatively, eyes closed. They stretch their arms wide, as if to embrace the heavens, then slowly reach into the circle toward each other. They linger there, as if soaking up a collective energy.

The music grows more intense and their leader exhorts them to try some belly dancing movements. Soon they are twirling scarves around their heads and bodies, laughing, perspiring, losing the inhibitions they walked in with.

The women are of all shapes and ages and colors. But they all have one thing in common: breast cancer, in varying stages. They have come to the Arts Medicine class to seek what their medical doctors

[See CANCER, B-2]
Dr. Ilene Serlin leads the group.

CANCER from E-1

Arts medicine helps women cope

can’t give them: a new way of look-
ing and coping with their illness.

The class, which runs for 12
weeks, a two-hour session each
week, incorporates dance move-
ment and art within a group-thera-
py structure. Its aim is to help
breast cancer patients cope with
the sometimes debilitating side-
effects of the disease. Those can
range from the physical, such as a
loss of mobility because of surgery
to the emotional: depression and a
mistrust of the body that has “be-
trayed” them by illness.

“There isn’t much work being
done with body imagery and well-
ness,” says Dr. Ilene Serlin, the
psychologist and dance therapist
who leads the group. “We try to
help them move from a sense of
betrayal about their bodies towards
loving themselves again.”

In its first year, the Arts Medi-
cine Program — part of the Pro-
gram in Medicine and Philosophy
at California Pacific Medical Cen-
ter — has assisted around 60 wom-
en. But that number barely
scratches the surface. Thirty years
ago, breast cancer struck one in
every 20 American women. The
rate is now one in nine; of those,
the disease will kill one in four —
40,000 women every year.

In San Francisco, the picture is
even more grim: According to sta-
tistics, for nearly 50 years The City
has had the highest reported inci-
dence in the world for white wom-
en. There is a “breast cancer clus-
ter” in the Bayview/Hunter’s Point
neighborhood that has researchers
conflounded. And every day, three
Bay Area women die of the disease.

Serlin says that medical re-
search conducted at Stanford
shows that women in support
groups live longer and have a
higher quality of life than those
who are not. Hence, a group was
formed to allow patients to express
themselves physically — through
dance — and emotionally through
artwork.

Groups begin with an invo-
cation by Serlin, then an opening
ritual of repetitive dance move-
ments. The second stage deals with
movement of different parts of the
body, and body imagery work.
Then the women express their feel-
ings on paper, through artwork.

And though the drawings are
crude, they are powerful in their
messages. Common themes are
ecological, with the patient being
part of the cycle of life on the earth,
and spiritual, with images of angels
and rainbows and sunlight. Partici-
pants are encouraged to write
words to accompany their images.

After the scarf dancing, the
group sits down to sketch. After a
time, they share their work with
the others. (All of the women re-
quested that their names not be
used. “I still want to control who I
tell and when,” says one.)

“This is me throwing off the
insecurity and fear I feel,” says one
young woman, who has drawn
swirling bright patterns. “Yesterday,
I had a three-month check
and now I have to wait a week for
the results. I am trying not to be
afraid.”

Clearly, each woman’s cancer
is prevalent in their artwork.

Says another, showing her
drawing of a transparent body, or-
gans sketched in: “This yellow light
that circulates here is energy I was
feeling when we danced. These (or-
gans) are the lungs and liver, where
the cancer tends to metastasize.”

Serlin focuses on her positive
comments. “Yes, it’s very impor-
tant to visualize that energy. To
see our bodies as separate and not
under our complete control.”

Some of the drawings reflect a
dire sadness; others are optimistic.
One reads: “The darkness will be
consumed by light and laughter.”
Another, “There are still rainbows,
even if one has a black time.” And
humor emerges, in a drawing of
colorful concentric circles, entitled
simply: “Boobs with cancer.”

One of Serlin’s favorite mecha-
nisms is the warrior dance, a ritual
derived from her travels through-
out the world, where she learned
the “universal truths” of dance.

“They learn that being a warrior
doesn’t mean going through life
with aggressiveness; it means moving
through life bravely, with an open
heart.”

Judging by the first year of
the pilot project, her approach
seems to be working. “What’s coming out
is that they each respect their body
more and there has been some de-
crease in depression,” says Serlin,
adding, “We focus on letting this
be a turning point for them.”

She notes that the healing pro-
cess has little to do with outside
forces. “We believe that each per-
son, each body, has its own healing
power. We’re simply helping them
recover the resources they already
have.”

Sharing her drawing and poem
with the group, a young woman
smiles through her tears. “This is
what I wrote: I’m powerless, I’m
strength, I’m weakness, I’ve over-
come my illness and I love me.”