

# Breast cancer patients learn to love themselves again

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

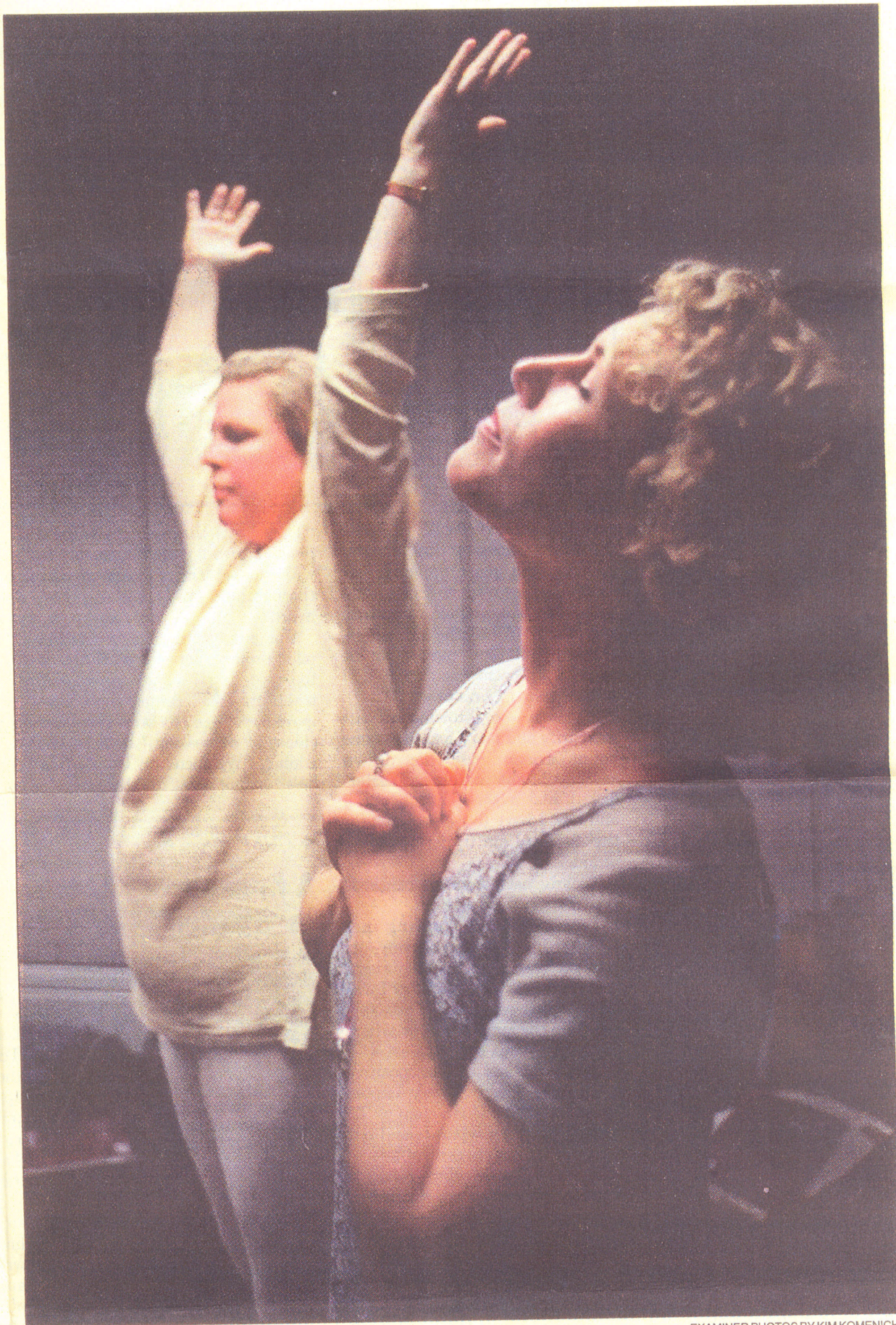
By Jane Ganahl  
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

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, E-2]



EXAMINER PHOTOS BY KIM KOMENICH

Katherine Vestevich, right, a Ph.D student and assistant to Dr. Ilene Serlin, participates with a breast cancer patient in a dance and art therapy class.



#### Members of Dr. Ilene Serlin's

Arts Medicine class, all victims of breast cancer, express themselves physically and emotionally through dance and artwork.





EXAMINER/KIM KOMENICH

Dr. Ilene Serlin leads the group.

◆ *CANCER from E-1*

## Arts medicine helps women cope

can't give them: a new way of looking at and coping with their illness.

The class, which runs for 12 weeks, a two-hour session each week, incorporates dance movement and art within a group-therapy 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 "betrayed" them by illness.

"There isn't much work being done with body imagery and wellness," 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 Medicine Program — part of the Program in Medicine and Philosophy at California Pacific Medical Center — has assisted around 60 women. 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 — 46,000 women every year.

In San Francisco, the picture is even more grim: According to statistics, for nearly 50 years The City has had the highest reported incidence in the world for white women. There is a "breast cancer cluster" in the Bayview/Hunter's Point neighborhood that has researchers confounded. And every day, three Bay Area women die of the disease.

Serlin says that medical research 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 invocation by Serlin, then an opening ritual of repetitive dance movements. The second stage deals with movement of different parts of the body, and body imagery work. Then the women express their feelings 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 requested 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, organs sketched in: "This yellow light that circulates here is energy I was feeling when we danced. These (organs) are the lungs and liver, where the cancer tends to metastasize."

Serlin focuses on her positive comments. "Yes, it's very important 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 mechanisms is the warrior dance, a ritual derived from her travels throughout the world, where she learned the "universal truths" of dance.

"They learn that being a warrior doesn't mean going through life with antagonism; 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 decrease in depression," says Serlin, adding, "We focus on letting this be a turning point for them."

She notes that the healing process has little to do with outside forces. "We believe that each person, 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 power, I'm strength, I'm weakness, I've overcome my illness and I love me.'"