

JUXTA POSITIONS

MICA

MARYLAND INSTITUTE COLLEGE OF ART



Using Art For Healing

MICA Alumni Transform Lives of Cancer Patients

IT'S NOT UNUSUAL FOR MICA STUDENTS and alumni to put their talents to work in the community, but two former students are showing that art not only inspires, but it heals.

When her friend was diagnosed with cancer some years ago, **Sherri Romm** was concerned when the friend wouldn't leave her house because her hair was falling out.

"I put my skills together and took a cast mold of her bald head, and I created a wig for her," said Romm, who studied painting through MICA's School for Professional and Continuing Studies program over the course of 12 years. "I didn't really know what I was doing, but I figured I knew how to put together three-dimensional work." Romm sent the design to a factory overseas and the finished product transformed her friend's life. "She became herself again," Romm recalled.

Today, Romm is working her magic for other cancer patients at her Owings Mills, Md., specialty hair salon, Versacchi Studios. "Hair is so important to people, and it really symbolizes the image that they want to project to the world," she said. Romm creates wigs that mimic the way people looked before losing their hair. "That's where my artistic background came into play because I used a lot of the skills that I would use for painting—really observing the way that hair really is and what was not good in the current wigs and hairpieces out there."

Another former student who's using art to tackle cancer head-on is alumna **Andy Cooper**, who graduated from MICA in 1979 with a degree in general fine arts. Cooper, a breast cancer survivor herself, wished she had something to distract herself with during the long, dark days of chemotherapy 13 years ago. So today, thanks to two grants, Cooper shares her art expertise with patients at Mercy Hospital and St. Joseph Medical Center in Baltimore. "Art is therapeutic in that it provides an outlet for creativity," Cooper said. "With these folks, it provides a very welcome aspect of distraction, and any aspect that brings people some happiness is good for the healing process."

Each week, Cooper makes her rounds in the hospitals with a cart full of supplies. "It's kind of like an art classroom on wheels, and I pretty much have it stocked with anything they could ever need," she said. Patients have worked on a variety of crafts that can be completed in one sitting, ranging from crepe paper flowers to paintings. "I think what drives me to do this is seeing the difference from when I sit down with someone to when I leave them," Cooper said. "I've had people tell me they had woken up that morning dreading coming to get chemotherapy and they never imagined they'd be doing something like this."

Both Romm and Cooper are testaments that the artistic skills learned at MICA can change lives. "Those skills can definitely be used in any kind of creative spirit or endeavor," Romm said.



(Top to bottom) A client shown before and after wearing one of Sherri Romm's wigs; a hand decorated as part of the Hands of Hope project led by Andy Cooper.