

Bringing out the inner beauty

Amid the exhausting battles, cancer patients enjoy a welcome pause to find transformation and courage in henna tattoo crowns.

By: [Alyssa Allen](#)

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The big moment had arrived.

It came time for Melissa VanKlombenburg, 38, to look in the mirror. For two hours, a makeup artist and two henna tattoo artists had been transforming her with full makeup and elaborate henna on her head, back, hands and arms.

“I can’t wait to see it,” VanKlombenburg said. “I’m terrified, but I’m excited.”

She stood up and looked in the mirror.

“Oh my gosh, that’s drama,” she said. “I look like I should be on a runway. Wow.”

“Oh, it’s so good,” she added.

The day served as VanKlombenburg’s turn to enjoy a break from the routine of chemotherapy treatments and doctor’s appointments.

She would be crowned.

As a participant in the [Crowns of Courage](#) project, she would spend the day getting makeup and henna tattoos, then posing for professional photos.

Crowns of Courage, which will exhibit in [ArtPrize 2017](#), began in 2016. Henna tattoo artist Amanda Gilbert wanted to help chemotherapy patients who had lost their hair celebrate their fight against cancer with a henna crown tattoo. Since then, about 15 women have participated. More will continue through the summer.

Gilbert, founder of [Happy Henna](#) in Grand Rapids, joined Grand Rapids photographer Dave Burgess, fellow henna artist Steve Stone and makeup artist Jessica Renusson to form the Crowns of Courage team.



On a day when she wasn't receiving a cancer treatment, Melissa VanKlombenburg became a participant in the Crowns of Courage project. (Chris Clark | Spectrum Health Beat)

The magical transformation all happens at Burgess' [616 Studio](#) in Wyoming, Michigan. Each of them is donating their time and materials for the project.

Henna is a natural product made from the powder of the leaf of a flowering plant, mixed with lemon juice and essential oils. When applied to the skin, the paste dyes the skin and then flakes off, leaving the design behind. The tint darkens after a few days and it lasts for up to a month.

On that May morning, after VanKlompenburg's big reveal, it came time for lunch.

"How do you eat tacos like this?" VanKlompenburg asked.

Laughter filled the room. But there would also be tears and hugs that emotional day.

Melissa's story

VanKlompenburg's morning started with Burgess focusing a video camera on her. Tears flowed, from her and the team members, as she shared her story.

"Goodness, this has been an experience so far," she started.

VanKlompenburg, a mother of Elise, 5, and Kai, 3, moved from North Carolina to Caledonia, Michigan, in 2014 with her husband, Chad, to be closer to her family.

In January, she visited her family doctor after finding a lump in her breast. The doctor, suspecting a cyst, ordered a mammogram. Two days later, on Jan. 5, she went in for her first mammogram and then a breast ultrasound.

"The first question (the ultrasound technician) asked was, 'Are you here alone?'" VanKlompenburg said. "Of course I was, because I didn't think it was a big deal."

The technician started taking measurements, first in the location where VanKlompenburg had felt a lump, then in a second location, then in her armpit, then another location.

"I knew before the technician left that things were not as they seemed," she said.

She went on to talk about telling her family.

"I am the oldest of five children and I am the first to be diagnosed in my generation," she said. "So it was all new. The most difficult part was having to tell the people I love over and over and over and having to see their reaction."

As a result of her diagnosis, VanKlompenburg had genetic testing, revealing she was BRCA2 positive, putting her at a higher risk for not only breast cancer, but also ovarian and uterine cancer. Immediately, her concern was for her mother, sisters, aunts and children.

VanKlompenburg is currently undergoing chemotherapy. She is a patient of [Amy VanderWoude, MD](#), a medical oncologist at the Spectrum Health [Lemmen-Holton Cancer Pavilion](#).

Still ahead for her is a bilateral mastectomy with reconstructive surgery and nodal dissection to remove lymph nodes. Then she will have radiation and, eventually, a complete hysterectomy to prevent ovarian and uterine cancer.

“At this stage, I’m just at the beginning,” VanKlompenburg said to the camera.

Burgess then asked her about her hair loss. VanKlompenburg shaved her long, fine, straight hair at a “shave party” two days before her chemotherapy started in February. Doctors had told her she would likely lose it all.

“I needed to prepare my kids,” she said. “I thought, ‘I have control over this.’ I can control how I message it to them.”

She has chosen not to shield her bald head with a wig or scarf, even when she’s working as an education consultant for school administrators.

“I do get strange looks when I go out in public, but I just smile,” she said. “I know that’s something they need to deal with, not me.”

The interview ended and Burgess turned off the camera. He gave VanKlompenburg a big hug.

“Thank you,” she said as they hugged. “Thank you for this opportunity.”

Burgess responded: “I think it’s the other way around.”

An outpouring of interest

Burgess said they have had an outpouring of interest from women who would like to be crowned. It’s unlikely they’ll be able to involve everyone, but they are working hard to include as many women as possible.

Meanwhile, they are planning for their ArtPrize exhibit, which will be located in DeVos Place Convention Center. After ArtPrize, they hope to create a book of the women’s photos and stories.

For Gilbert and the rest of the team, this is a labor of love.

Gilbert learned the art of henna tattoos seven years ago as a result of her work with refugees resettling in Grand Rapids. She noticed women from many different parts of the world wearing henna and saw it as a form of art that breaks down boundaries.

“It was to promote and bring out beauty in women,” she said.

She saw it as a tool to “empower women at a time when women are the most vulnerable.”

“I’m bringing that inner beauty out onto the skin,” Gilbert said.

Burgess invited Renusson, a cancer survivor herself, to join the team.

“When he asked me, he said, ‘I don’t know if this hits too close to home for you,’ and I said, ‘Absolutely not. I have been waiting for this moment,’” Renusson said. “I am thrilled to be here and to give back.”

Burgess said women like VanKlombenburg keep him going.

“It’s gratifying,” he said. “Look at her. How can you not get your batteries charged by meeting women like Melissa?”

Lizz’s crowning

Lizz Grams, 30, looks back on the day she was crowned, April 12, as a transformation.

“It changed me, as silly as that may sound,” Grams said. “I think that’s their point in doing it, to help people feel beautiful. Now I am not scared to show my head. It opened up doors for everything.”

Grams, who lives in Dorr with her husband and son, Griffin, was diagnosed on July 13, 2016, with a very rare synovial sarcoma in her right foot. At the time, she was 35 weeks pregnant.

Grams had spent years trying to find the correct diagnosis for her ongoing foot pain, which had become so bad she was on crutches for most of her pregnancy. It turned out to be an aggressive tumor the size of a softball.

After her diagnosis, doctors induced labor. On July 21, she delivered a healthy baby boy. Three weeks later, doctors were forced to amputate her leg below the knee.

Believing the cancer was gone, Grams went in for her three-month follow-up scan, which revealed spots on her lungs. She had a surgical biopsy in November, showing that the same synovial sarcoma had spread to her lungs.

Doctors said they needed to wait until the spots were larger to remove them, but by the time she had another scan, they had doubled in number and size—making surgery impossible.

So she started chemotherapy in January at Lemmen-Holton Cancer Pavilion under the care of orthopedic oncologist [Matthew Steensma, MD](#), and oncologist [Jared Knol, MD](#).

Then, her mother died in February.

“She was and always will be the most selfless, loving woman, and I am blessed to call her my mom,” Grams said.

Her chemotherapy treatment continues. “Right now, we are happy with what we have seen and we are praying that it will continue to work,” Grams said.

When it was time for her crowning, Grams knew exactly what she wanted in her henna tattoo design—lilies, as they were her mother’s favorite flower, and a griffin in honor of her young son, Griffin.

Until the day of her crowning, Grams had only ever shown her bald head to her husband and his grandmother. When she walked out of Burgess' studio that day, she knew that would change.

That night she went to her amputee support group at [Spectrum Health Blodgett Hospital](#) without a wig or scarf.

"I wanted to let everyone see the beautiful work they did," she said. "I continued that day after day. I didn't want to wear anything on it."

Losing her long hair was difficult for Grams. She shaved her head the day before her mother's funeral.

"The journey has been long, but my husband and I and my friends and family have just continued to pray and know that it's not our timeline, but it's God's timeline," Grams said. "(Being crowned) gave me courage, and I hope it can help inspire anyone else going through cancer or amputation."

Meanwhile, she's helping little Griffin through teething.

"He doesn't see me any different, which is huge to me," she said.

If you have been diagnosed with cancer and would like a consultation or second opinion, call 1.855.SHCANCER (855.742.2623).

Please visit these beautiful henna crowns in person at ArtPrize Nine from Sept. 20 to Oct. 8, 2017, in downtown Grand Rapids, Michigan. Spectrum Health is proud to be the presenting sponsor of the ArtPrize Health and Wellness program, which seeks to share the health benefits of this unique community event.