

COURAGE *unmasked*

RADIATION MASKS-TURNED-ART HELP
RAISE FUNDS FOR CANCER PATIENTS

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"Athena's Owl" by Barbara Kerne. "Tree of Life" by Wendy M. Ross. "Shades of Colorado" by Anita Hinders. "I Can See Clearly Now" by Mark Behme. "Lady Arashi" by Janet Barnard. "The Gift" by Joyce Zipperer. "Beauty and the Beast" by Jessica Beels. "To-Do" by Jeanne Garant. "gestation (hope)" by Jacqui Crocetta. "Flight" by June Linowitz. "Tides" by Susanna Giller. "Brain Teaser" by Jessica Beels. ©Ulf Wallin Photography, Ulf Wallin and Chris Birck

turn the page for the story.



What started as radiation treatment for head and neck cancer became one patient's mission to help other cancer patients by transforming radiation masks into works of art.

For six years, Cookie Kerxton's physician told her not to worry about her hoarseness. But a second opinion in January 2008 took Kerxton by surprise when she was diagnosed with vocal cord cancer (glottic cancer).

With a recommendation to see radiation oncologist Gopal (Paul) K. Bajaj, MD, at Inova Fairfax Hospital in Fairfax, Va., Kerxton started radiation therapy. Dr. Bajaj cautioned her about the possible side effects from the treatment: mouth sores, feedings through a stomach tube, and the loss of swallowing ability and saliva, among others.

"I remember the day Paul told me all the things that could possibly happen. And it's pretty scary," Kerxton said.

After anticipating the myriad of side effects she may experience, Kerxton knows she "lucked out," only experiencing a burned neck and some difficulty swallowing. But her lack of side effects also meant she knew others with head and neck cancer had experienced much worse than she did.

"Because she had very early stage larynx cancer, and most of our head and neck patients with more advanced disease are treated with IMRT at a facility around the corner, she probably didn't get to see as many patients, but we had discussed that there are a lot of patients that don't have the social support network," Dr. Bajaj explained.

"The demographic, classically, of head and neck cancer has always been lower socioeconomic class, patients that tend to have long-term exposure to alcohol, tobacco and things like that. So often times these are the patients within your clinic that have the most social needs. They have issues with speech, with swallowing, physical therapy afterward and just lots and lots of costs related to the treatment in terms of getting nutrition, pain medication and other supportive medications."

As she went through her treatment, which used a radiation mask, Kerxton questioned what other head and neck cancer patients did with their masks after their treatments were finished.

"They told me, 'Some people take them home; some people leave them here, and some people run them over with their car,'" Kerxton said.

And that's when Kerxton, an artist, got an idea: turn no longer needed radiation masks into works of art to help those dealing with head and neck cancer. From there, *Courage Unmasked* was born.

"I said, 'I'm an artist, and how would you feel if I asked my friends if they would decorate the masks, and we can auction them off and raise money to help people with their treatment,'" Kerxton said.

The idea was a hit, so Kerxton and others started collecting masks.

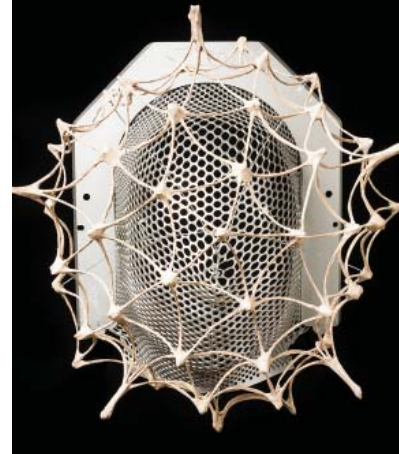
"We would tell patients about the event, and so many of them would say they would be happy to donate their mask," said Dr. Bajaj. "So we went through a collection, and we recruited other radiation facilities in the area. We were able to get the masks without any problem. I'm still sort of perpetually collecting masks."

From there, Kerxton used her connections in the art world to spread the word about the project. The response was overwhelming.

"I was just swamped," Kerxton explained. "I had to turn people down. I didn't know it at the time, but some of these people were really well-known artists."

One of the artists that participated was Jessica Beels, who created a mask in 2009 ("Brain Teaser") and 2012 ("Beauty and the Beast") and found out about the event through an art listserv.

"It was very different from what I usually work with, but one of the things that drew me to the form was that it has an intrinsic mesh form," said Beels, who works in paper sculpture, jewelry, beads and other mixed media. "The material was inviting and durable, but daunting because of what it was. If you donate to something like this [*Courage Unmasked*], it changes your perspective of what you're working on. It gives you an automatic narrative and adds



to the challenge—the materials are challenging and [the materials] give you a form for thinking in a narrative way that's challenging."

After soliciting for artists, the next step for Kerxton was to find a sponsor. "It turned out that one of my best friends was the head of NCCS [National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship], and she said we'll sponsor you," Kerxton said.

That sponsorship, combined with all of the efforts of Kerxton and those around her, resulted in the inaugural Courage Unmasked event in September 2009. Held at the Katzen Arts Center at American University in Washington, the event featured 108 masks transformed into art and auctioned off to more than 500 guests, grossing \$130,000.

"Cookie had this vision that she wanted," Dr. Bajaj said. "The fact that she pulled off that event [Courage Unmasked] is really remarkable because you don't see that a lot day to day.

"But Cookie is the most determined patient I've ever met in terms of getting it off the ground. She has so much gumption, and she's fearless in terms of walking up to people and saying, 'I need money from you.'"

The proceeds from the event helped establish 9114HNC (Help for Head and Neck Cancer), which was sponsored by NCCS from 2009 to 2011, and has since received 501(c)(3) status. The organization grants funds to head and neck cancer patients with financial need in the greater metropolitan Washington area and also works to raise awareness of the needs of head and neck cancer patients and to educate about vaccine preventable cancers, especially with the increase in human papillomavirus (HPV)-associated diseases.

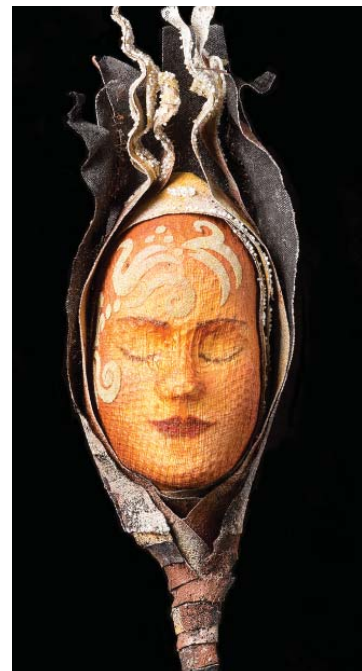
"There's this epidemic now of patients with HPV-associated disease. Probably about 60 percent of the patients I see in our head and neck clinic are patients with HPV-associated disease," Dr. Bajaj explained. "People who never had exposure to tobacco, just social alcohol consumption, and these patients are presenting with advanced cancers at a relatively young age.

"I find myself having to educate the pathologists, the surgeons, the medical oncologists that this is a new entity and we need to be aware of it. So that's part of the mission of the organization as well—to educate."

With the success of the first Courage Unmasked, the group organized a second event. Courage Unmasked 2, held in September 2012 at the Katzen Arts Center, auctioned 59 masks, grossing \$80,920. The success of both events has allowed 9114HNC to provide \$50,000 in grants to 100 patients for expenses not covered by insurance.

As word about Courage Unmasked and 9114HNC has spread, the organization has discussed where it goes next—from planning another Washington-area event to expanding geographically and reaching new patients outside its current scope.

"I think that there's certainly a place to have a Courage Unmasked in New York City and San Francisco and Dallas and Chicago and other large cities," Dr. Bajaj said. "It's just a matter of people finding out about it as a unique way to take this radiation experience and turn it into something positive and have that result go directly back to the patients. There's so few things that we do that really are capable of doing that." *Continued on Page 34*



SPECIALreport

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sial and cutting-edge issues with a patient-centered view. Deborah A. Kuban, MD, FASTRO, and Anthony L. Zietman, MD, FASTRO, will be the co-moderators for this fun and enlightening morning session.

The Annual Meeting Scientific Committee chairman and vice-chairman Lynn Wilson, MD, MPH, FASTRO, and Benjamin Movsas, MD, FASTRO, and the Annual Meeting Education Committee chairman and vice-chairman, Andrea Ng, MD, and Catherine Park, MD, have worked tirelessly to put together a fabulous program for your education and enjoyment. We have a great group of invited speakers and session moderators for a total of 19 panel discussions and 50 educational sessions.

The scientific oral and poster presentations promise to be some of the most comprehensive in ASTRO history with 2,330 abstract submissions. The plenary session will feature the latest in cutting-edge clinical science, and the extremely popular *e*Contouring learning lab sessions will be enhanced. In addition to the scientific and educational program, attendees will again have the opportunity to network with friends and colleagues. Be sure to visit the Exhibit Hall featuring the world's largest exhibition of the latest radiation oncology technologies, services and publications valuable to you and your practice.

Registration is currently open. We look forward to your participation in our Society's 55th Annual Meeting in Atlanta. The meeting promises to be patient centered with exciting research and education for all attendees.

Dr. Lawton is professor, program director and vice-chairman of radiation oncology at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. She welcomes comments on this column at astronews@astro.org.

International Impact

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at the Health Care Global Hospital in Bangalore, India, a dedicated cancer center.


During his time there, Dr. Giri worked in patient care with consultants and residents, helped set up a residency program and associated programs, participated in tumor boards and new patient clinics, and helped initiate studies on care delivered as part of outcome reporting.

"The physicians and support staff were very keen on learning and implementing standards," he said.

Dr. Giri has used the lessons learned during his time at the hospital in India in his work with patients in Mississippi.

"There are some similarities between the poor in India and the indigent patients we have in Mississippi," he said. "I have a much better understanding of their needs and the work that needs to be done to ensure timely and equal access to care."

Having put his experience in India into place in the United States, Dr. Giri hopes to go back to India as much as possible to continue his work.

"I would like to believe that I helped in improving patient care, teaching and research. It was a way to give back to India where I received my basic medical training," Dr. Giri said. "Personally, it was extremely satisfying and humbling to work with this group in providing the same high quality care to 'paying' patients and to the poor." 

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While there are no immediate plans for a third Courage Unmasked, Kerxton thinks there is a place for another event to continue the organization's support for head and neck cancer patients.

"The first was a novelty; the second one was lovely and wonderful," Kerxton said. "We have been talking about getting more young people because they are at risk and because they would come to an event because they are art collectors. We'd love to have another one, in another location, another venue, another audience."

Dr. Bajaj would also like to see more radiation oncologists get involved to help the organization expand and reach more patients.

"I see patients every day who confide in me as their physician that they can't make it through the treatment financially or socially. And I can turn to them and say, 'We have avenues for helping you with that,'" Dr. Bajaj

said. "Before Cookie and this fund, I couldn't say anything like that. If every radiation oncologist could sit there and talk to their patients who express this kind of need and say, 'I have a way that I can help you,' that would be great."

While the success of Courage Unmasked and 9114HNC is the work of countless artists, supporters and others, the organization's ability to thrive and help patients stems from the passion of one cancer survivor.

"Cookie is retired, but this fund has become her full-time job that she does out of the goodness of her heart, and it's really amazing," Dr. Bajaj said. "I have to ask myself, 'If I was in Cookie's place, would I be devoting this much time to something like this?' It takes one motivated patient to take something that is literally one man's trash and make it into something that can help. It's really admirable."

For more information on or to donate to 9114HNC, visit www.courageunmasked.org. 