

## Hobby for therapy gives rise to success

■ Wanda Kirby painted her first ceramic vase during her recovery from cancer. Now she and a friend have a thriving business.

By KIM GILMORE  
Times Correspondent

**BROOKSVILLE** — As Wanda Kirby saw it, she had two choices: give in and die or fight like hell. She chose to fight.

Her initial reaction back in 1990 had been calm fear. A gut feeling told her something was wrong, but it didn't seem like much at the time.

That would soon change. So would everything else about Kirby's life.

Cancer does that.

"It disrupts your chemical, psychological and emotional well-being," said Kirby, who became deeply depressed.

Looking back, that was the window of opportunity — the reason that compelled Laura Wever to intervene on her friend's behalf, cementing their friendship, helping Kirby replace her emptiness and laying the foundation for a successful business partnership.

The two women have turned what they started as an artistic hobby into a thriving custom ceramics business whose customers include designers, individuals and the likes of Kmart, Wal-Mart, Target and Rooms To Go.

The business is aptly named

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### Broken Mold.

Kirby discovered the cancer while attending a real estate seminar in St. Louis.

Tired after a long session, she returned to her hotel room. As she placed her arms across her chest, her hand brushed something that left a hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach.

A lump. Then another, both in her right breast.

"Instinctively, I knew," she said.

That was on a Thursday. The following Tuesday, she was sitting in a Tampa doctor's office discussing surgical options.

Kirby recalls telling her doctor: "If it's benign, there's not a problem. If I'm too far gone, just stitch me back up."

The diagnosis was mixed. One tumor was benign; the other was malignant. Both tumors were removed the following week.

Then came six months of chemotherapy, followed by two months of radiation treatments.

After it was all over, Kirby never went back to see her doctor. No follow-up visits. No future mammograms. Nothing.

She never looked back either. "I have conquered it," she said. "If there's cancer in there, then tough. It's gonna do what it's gonna do anyway."

### Moody and depressed

In the coming months, the disease and treatments would take their toll on Kirby's small frame.

She lost her fingernails and toenails to chemotherapy, gained 35 pounds and referred to herself

as a "bald blimp." She cut her thinning hair in a pixie, a gesture Wever found courageous.

"I had control that way," Kirby explained.

Worst of all, Kirby was mentally fatigued. She became moody and depressed. Before, she always had strong feelings. Wever said. "Nothing gave her pleasure anymore."

Wever knew she had to do something.

But what? How could she take her friend's mind off the cancer?

A light bulb clicked on.

A hobby.

One that would distract Kirby from her grief. One she could work on at her own pace.

At the time, Wever co-owned a furniture store and was having trouble finding accessories to complement her furnishings. She persuaded Kirby to paint a ceramic vase to display in the store.

When the vase sold in less than 10 minutes, Kirby was hooked.

For the next year, she worked on consignment for the store, pouring her heart and soul into every piece.

It paid off.

"For weeks in the store, the only things that sold were her vases," Wever said.

### No time for depression

The first year, Kirby had difficulty keeping up with demand for the accessories.

"The hardest thing was I had no energy," she said. "Every task was monumental."

But with Wever's help, the two managed not only to fill orders, but also to expand the business. They worked night and day from their homes, creating new molds, hand

painting each piece and locating additional retail vendors to display their work.

As luck would have it, a broker for Wal-Mart was driving through Brooksville and spotted a Broken Mold vase in the window of a local gift shop. He later arranged an appointment for the women with one of the store's buyers, who ordered 40 pieces.

There was no time for depression now.

Wal-Mart's order soon grew to 2,400. It wasn't long before buyers for Kmart and Target department stores were placing similar orders.

In 1992, seeking a more upscale market, Wever approached a buyer for the retail furniture chain Rooms To Go, who placed one small order. That number has tripled in the past two months.

With boxes and bubble wrap filling their garages, Kirby and Wever decided that their burgeoning "hobby" needed a home of its own.

Four months ago, with success under their belt, they opened a showroom at the Country Village Complex on State Road 50 east of Brooksville to display prototypes for buyers and local business owners.

Today, Broken Mold ceramics appear in stores throughout Florida, Georgia and South Carolina, bearing labels that read: "Made in Brooksville, Florida USA."

Not bad for two women who "learned by the seat of our pants," Kirby said.

The company's creations include bird houses, animals, sea life, Christmas items, cookie jars, vases, bowls and wall hangings.

Patterns range from traditional and country to Southwestern motif.

Occasionally, the women work jointly with interior decorators to produce custom designs for homeowners. They also carry a small line of primitive imports from Mexico.

In addition, Target has ex-

pressed interest in carrying the merchandise nationwide. But that would mean mass production and added problems.

"We're just not sure we want to jump into that," Kirby said.

For now, the challenge is creating new and different pieces from the same molds. And, more so, living life to its fullest, a desire that comes with having experi-

enced cancer.

"Every minute you spend afraid to . . . fly a plane, start a business or whatever, you've lost that part of your life," Kirby said.

Wever agrees but said facing the possibility of death second-hand has softened her.

"I've become much more tolerant. To me it don't mean (a) hill of beans."