



Sheryl and Jimmy

Taking A Creative Path Around Chronic Illness

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Pablo Picasso is quoted as saying that “Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life” and he, like other artists through time, have used their creativity as a method of exploring life and at times a way to escape.

Research has shown that creating art can lead to a healing of both the mind and body with improved relaxation and stress relief, pain management and improvements in many physiological markers of health.

Art and music have identifiable effects on a person's autonomic nervous system, brain neurotransmitters, immune system, hormonal balance and an overall improvement of blood circulation and flow around the

body. A creative pursuit is said to improve our sense of self and wellbeing.

To find a path of creativity that can help a healing process is particularly important when someone is faced with a life filled with daily and ongoing management. Creating art can be as important as medication, meditation and the daily walk and like many people living with chronic disease, Sheryl Speers has found that creating art has helped with her healing.

Sheryl grew up and continues to live in Newcastle, her introduction to art started at high school in Jesmond. School art classes introduced Sheryl to many different media of ceramics, drawing and painting and also art history which she loved. Despite having some skills in art creation these were put aside to begin her adult life outside of school. Sheryl went to work and married Seamus and they were blessed with the birth of their son Liam in 1993. However, Sheryl's story took an unexpected turn as she struggled with a lot of residual pain and fatigue after Liam's birth. Initially she thought that this was a result of being a new mum; however she continued to be unwell.

Sheryl kept on going to the GP reporting an increasing number of symptoms; however no reason for illness could be confirmed. Sheryl says, "I did feel that many of my symptoms were not taken seriously and I was made to feel like a hypochondriac, but I persisted and was sent to a rheumatologist who diagnosed me with a pain syndrome called Fibromyalgia. However, once again this in part was attributed to being a new mum and not getting adequate sleep." Sheryl began to notice that her fingers regularly turned white and blue as well as becoming numb and throbbled with pain; she also developed difficulty in swallowing and reactivity to foods that she had previously eaten without incident.

Her symptoms over the next months increased as

did the severity of the symptoms with her fingertips now becoming ulcerated, small white calcium lumps were present on her face and around her eyes and she had developed shortness of breath. Sheryl knew this was more than being a tired mum and that she needed to find someone to take the symptoms seriously.

In 1998 Sheryl changed GPs and was subsequently diagnosed with Scleroderma and after a closer examination of her eyes was told she also had a condition called Sjögren's Syndrome and that her digestive issues were related to gastroparesis. Sheryl's cluster of autoimmune illnesses was added to over the years with a diagnosis of lupus and also pulmonary arterial hypertension (PAH).

To help with understanding of her symptoms and management Sheryl's GP referred her to the Autoimmune Resource Centre (ARRC) to get advice from the then clinical nurse consultant, Rachel Rossiter.

This referral led to being introduced to Dr Glenn Reeves for further help in treating her autoimmune diseases and a strong relationship with ARRC. Sheryl says that ARRC is always introducing her to something new to learn and use and has helped her to maintain a life of quality.

Through the years since diagnoses, Sheryl has developed a great insight into how to accommodate the symptoms and find a way forward with positivity. Her desire to give back to others with autoimmune illness is the catalyst for her telling her story. >





Sheryl with her painting Seagull

Sheryl says, "I feel lucky as I managed to connect with the right support people. This is critical when you have a complex illness. You need support and understanding from a team not just one person, your GP, a good specialist, nurse, friends and family.

I'd also add your small friends as my puppy Jimmy has been a great support to me particularly on bad days. It is important to ask questions as the symptoms change and there are times when the disease takes over. You soon find out that the life you thought you were going to have is now different.

The basics of life, like breathing, sleeping, eating and going to the toilet become a daily challenge. The medications help to calm and get things working but also have side effects that need further tablets and management. Life at times centre's around managing illness day in day out. You try and make plans but don't always get there."

Sheryl adds that she soon realised that "A lot of the activities move around eating, drinking and socialising and not everyone understands that when you have illness these can be difficult and sometimes plans need to be changed at the last minute. After a while invitations start to dry up. Holidaying is a challenge as it takes a lot of organising and planning only for them to fall over at the last minute due to a flare of symptoms. You spend a lot of time alone surrounded by reminders of illness which can lead to deep sadness and depression."

Sheryl's own inner reflection directed her to find an outlet away from the 'lived norm' and she actively pursued something to give her a different headspace and focus. At this time Sheryl reconnected with art making so as to try and find space around her diseases.

In 2010, Sheryl took part in a one- day epicurean art class run by local Hamilton South artist Sophie Mill. Sheryl realised an instant connection with Sophie and equates this meeting as a life changing moment. The day inspired Sheryl and over the next weeks she kept going back to it in her thoughts and started to do a little drawing and painting. Sheryl thought to ask Sophie to tutor her to improve her skills, however self-doubt about her art ability and feared of rejection prevented her asking. In 2014 Sheryl was driving past the studio and despite her own internal questions and fears, Sheryl stopped the car and went in and asked for help. Sophie agreed and they started working together the next week and still see each other regularly for lessons and painting sessions.

Sheryl was a willing student and turned herself over to learning about artmaking. "When I am painting, I get so lost in what is being put to canvas that I forget about my pain and my breathing and all that I do to manage everything. I get into a rhythm and totally fall into my surroundings," Sheryl said. She credits Sophie with teaching her to look at nature and everything in a different way. "She taught me about how much black there is in nature and I don't mean it in a negative way but nature has lots of shading, lightness and darkness, lots of texture and it became easy to explore this and move away from the symptoms".

Sheryl uses her art as a meditative and as a spiritual experience which enables her to bring back memories of her past as well as present. She focuses on colour and mixing colours and finds that this frees her mind to explore the new as well as rediscover the old with renewed focus. Art and making art is now part of her health therapy and Sheryl admits that if there is a period of time when she can't create art she struggles mentally and physically.

Sheryl is surrounded by a supportive team including her husband Seamus, who encourages her to make art and at times offers some helpful constructive criticism. Liam, her son is always researching her diseases and giving her articles that can continue her education, understanding and management. She also has a health therapy team around her including Sophie that keeps her on track.

Sheryl acknowledged the difficulty in living with illness and says as a final note, "It is a constant process that takes a whole team to support you attaining your best life, but it also takes the individual to sit back and find your way around, through and forward. For me it was the creative path". 