

'Cancer took my voice but not my music'

By Jane Elliott
BBC News health reporter

Beverley Ashill turned to song-writing when cancer left her unable to sing.

Beverley, who was a keen singer before being diagnosed with breast cancer, said her condition became so painful when it spread to her lungs that she was unable to breathe properly.

She refused to become despondent however, and penned 'That very breath', which is now being performed as part of an innovative piece; the Rosetta Requiem.

Rosetta gives people a chance to create something meaningful for themselves and to leave something behind
Beverley Ashill

As part of the requiem, funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, hospice users have been able to work alongside a host of stars including singer and lyricist Billy Bragg, voice coaches Carrie and David Grant, composer Orlando Gough and musician Jarvis Cocker, who helped them express their own stories.

Legacy

Beverley, who is terminally ill, said she was delighted Rosetta gave them an opportunity to leave a musical legacy.

"Rosetta gives people a chance to create something meaningful for themselves and to leave something behind," Beverley explained.

"I was first diagnosed with breast cancer five years ago. I had quite a lot of treatment and was told I was clear," said Beverley.

"Then two years ago it came back, and had spread and had gone to my lungs and my bones."

The women brought the words and I've simply helped channel them into songs and music to make a way through serious illness and emotional turmoil
Billy Bragg

When the 34-year-old Londoner discovered she was terminally ill she became involved with her local hospice, and through them with Rosetta Life.

"I have been given a terminal diagnosis and they cannot cure me they can just manage my condition," she said.

"I was told that cancer in my spine had got worse, and that made it more important for me to make this piece so that I can feel I am leaving something behind."

Beverley had treatment for her cancer, which has helped.

"I am doing reasonably well at the moment," she said, "And I am trying to live as much as I can, but I still have pains in my spine."

Beverley, who is now able to sing again and works part-time compiling audio tapes for the blind, said she had loved the whole experience of Rosetta.

"I think it has been fantastic I have always been really interested in the correlation between the creative arts and the healing process.

"For me it has been a cathartic process, and I feel it has helped me to keep going when I got down. It helps knowing that there are creative things in the pipeline."

Courage

Billy Bragg, whose father died of lung cancer when Billy was just 18, said he had been inspired by the courage of the women like Beverley.

"I have been constantly surprised to find how open people are to expressing themselves once they have been given a way-in," he said.

"The women brought the words and I've simply helped channel them into songs and music to make a way through serious illness and emotional turmoil."

Billy said that at first many of the women were reluctant to speak openly as a group, but that as the weeks went by that they became more and more confident.

He said that one lady called Maxine had been too ill to attend more than one of his sessions, but had still wanted to write a song for her daughter.

He asked her to jot down her snap-shots and used these to pen her song called 'We laughed'.

"She sent in reams of stuff, snap-shots of her and her daughter's lives.

"She said things like 'remember swimming with the dolphins off Portland Bill and we laughed. You always wanted to borrow my shoes and my make-up... and we laughed'."

"Maxine was incredibly full of life and vivacious she was so determined," he said.

Experiences

Maxine, 47, who had only been given six months to live, is now in remission and says she is grateful for the experiences of Rosetta.

"I had to face up to everything. Your heart-strings break. Writing about the fun Jess and I had, and working with Rosetta gave me a positive focus and has contribute to my getting better."

Lucinda Jarrett, Rosetta Artistic Director, said the aim was to change perceptions of death: "Our ideas of death and dying are rooted in sadness and melancholy.

"We wanted to make this requiem one that celebrates the hope, laughter and intense love of life experienced by the people we meet in the hospices."

Gill Thomas, art therapist at the Trinity Hospice, in Clapham, London, said the creative process was important for the well-being of those using the hospice.

"I am not interested in what something looks like, but in the creative process.

"It is a way of exploring when people have not got the words to express what they want to say, particularly when they are looking at the existential questions about life."

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