The Art of Healing

A picture-perfect look at positive diagnosis

July 1, 2004 By Nick Burns

Who: Angelo “Dimples” Ricco
What: Art opening
Where: Newark, NJ
When: 04.30.04

In April, Angelo Ricco and 16 of his fellow residents at Broadway House, a short-term-care facility for HIVers in Newark, New Jersey, produced their first-ever art show, “The Day.” Showcasing feelings about the day they were diagnosed, the show marked many residents’ first brush with an empty canvas. For Ricco, it was only a prelude to his life of renewed health and independence.

I was deathly ill in the winter of 2003, two years after my HIV diagnosis. I’ve had hepatitis B since 1982, and when I was brought to Broadway House with a hep siege, my HIV viral load shot up. A priest visited my room three times to read me my last rites. At first, I didn’t want to take HIV meds—I wanted to die. But the staff helped me see that life is beautiful and that the pills would keep me alive.

I hadn’t come to terms with my feelings about being diagnosed before coming to Broadway House. One day, I picked up a pencil and started drawing. Drawing and painting became therapeutic for me—they helped justify my feelings of anguish and guilt. For the show, my painting had four parts: a black curtain covering a white light, an eye crying blood tears, a snake of betrayal and a ladder showing that I have climbed to the top.

There were 17 of us in the exhibit. We talked about how we felt—about all the tears that were shed on the day we were diagnosed. Some people had never been in touch with their feelings or expressed themselves on canvas. I told them it’s what *you* see that makes it art. Everyone was very proud of the show—we felt like we were at a New York City gallery. I was dancing on air the whole time because I was excited but nervous about opening the gallery with my cohost, Leilani Capuli. I didn’t want the day to end.

When I leave Broadway House in two weeks, I’d like to keep painting. I’ve been here for 14 months, so I’m a little scared to return to the world. I’ll miss this place, but I’ll come back to visit or volunteer. I have 66 resident friends now. I love everyone here, and everyone here knows Angelo Ricco.

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