

Cancer patient's courage inspires young artist

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Artist **Lacey Lewis** finished a pastel painting of her friend **Danette Velez** of Olathe in July 2006, inspired by Velez's fortitude as she battled cancer.

The portrait, displayed at St. Luke's Hospital, shows Velez looking into the distance, hopeful, a slight smile on her face.

At the time Lewis, 25, of Kansas City, Kan., created the piece, she thought the worst had passed.

Velez, 35, and her husband, **Victor**, have five children. In August 2005, doctors discovered Danette had gestational trophoblastic disease, a rare but curable cancer caused by placental cells spreading outside the uterus.

After the diagnosis, Danette suffered a series of misfortunes many people would have found unbearable, Lewis said.

On the day complications sent Danette to the hospital, Victor flew to San Antonio, Texas, to be with his father, dying of bone cancer. A month later came news Danette's father had lung and brain cancer. Then, Victor totaled his car in an accident. Amid all this, Velez received weekly chemotherapy, spending a day in the hospital one week and two days the next.

But Danette maintained her serenity, Lewis said.

"Her spirit didn't show that," Lewis said. "I saw this intense beauty in the physical manifestations of her disease ... in conjunction with a kind of light com-

ARTIST, INSPIRATION



Lacey Lewis
Artist



Danette Velez
Subject

ing from inside of her. I was really inspired by the journey she had been on, and that's what I wanted to portray, the optimism that came through."

Doctors halted the chemo in May 2006 and Danette returned "to her bubbly, outgoing self," Lewis said.

But tests in June showed the cancer recurring, and Danette resumed chemo in August. Danette said this month that doctors plan to continue the treatment for three more months.

In December, Lewis painted another pastel of Danette. The colors are darker and the optimism diminished, yet it depicts peacefulness, strength and courage. Her hair gone, Danette's face is glowing from a candle in her hands. The background is a luminous white.

"This one is about what I saw going on with her internally and externally," Lewis said. "There's a bit more symbolism in it. She doesn't see her optimism or hope coming from within herself; she sees it coming from outside, spiritually and from the people who have been helping to support her."



BEN MCCALL/SUN PHOTO

ARTIST Lacey Lewis, Kansas City, Kan., left, and cancer patient **Danette Velez**, Olathe, look at Lewis' portrait of Velez in the lobby of the St. Luke's Cancer Institute Family Resource Center, 4321 Washington, Kansas City, Mo.

The white background represents the external source of optimism and the candle the internal source.

"Even though she says none of this is coming from her, I did see

a lot (of optimism) coming from her and how she affects other people," Lewis said.

Danette said her strength comes from her Christian faith and her friends. On first learning

of the cancer, Danette said, she felt an "amazing" tranquility she cannot fully explain.

"I felt an overwhelming spiritual peace, completely at peace, as though it was going to be OK," Danette said.

From May to August 2006, when tests were conducted that would confirm the cancer had returned, Danette said she prayed, meditated and read Christian scriptures, and then an answer came.

"I felt like God was saying to me this was an opportunity for growth," Danette said. "This wasn't about cancer or death; it was about growth, training and a time of equipping spiritually and that the tool that was being used was cancer."

Danette, who is a youth pastor with Victor at Unity Church of Overland Park, said she is on a lifelong spiritual quest and explores other faiths.

"I draw my optimism and hopefulness from my spirituality," she said. "It's not limited to Unity - it's from many perspectives, drawing from my whole life of experience, meeting Christians, atheists, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims. My belief in a God that is good always, and in all circumstances, is what drives me."

Danette said friends supported her family during her battle, bringing meals and doing chores.

"It made a huge difference," she said. "I don't feel alone; I don't feel like I'm isolated. I feel I have a little bit of what people of Africa or Asia have in having a village of people to take care of them."

The first painting will stay at St. Luke's for an indefinite period, Lewis said. People like and connect with it, especially those who have experienced cancer or know somebody who has, Lewis said.

"I tried to put a positive light on dealing with cancer," she said. "You can be hopeful in the face of cancer."

Lewis, born and raised in Syracuse, N.Y., moved to Kansas four years ago with her husband and son, now 8. She and Danette homeschool their children and met at a support group.

Lewis said she liked drawing as a child and decided at 14 to make painting a career. She studied art for two years at a Syracuse college before moving to Kansas.

Her heroes include Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt, and she said she found mentors in "living masters," including Virgil Elliott, William Whitaker and Steven Assail. She plans to study with Elliott next year.

Lewis is one of two Kansas painters to win a Kansas Art Commission fellowship this year.

"She displays excellent technical proficiency, a command of her medium and a physician's familiarity with biology," **Nick Malewski** wrote in *Review*, an art and architecture magazine, after viewing her November 2006 show "Repression and Revelation" at Pi Gallery, Kansas City, Mo.

As she observed Danette's "journey," Lewis said, she recorded her thoughts in words and pictures on her Web site, www.lacey-lewis.com, and [blog, laceylewis.blogspot.com](http://lacey-lewis.blogspot.com).