

## The Healing Power of

# Art

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**M**iriam Zimms (Gamma Chi, Stetson University) was at the peak of her career when her life changed with one word – cancer. Diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer, Miriam juggled work and treatment. And then more news: a second primary cancer, this time diagnosed in her pelvis as chondrosarcoma.

Through tests, treatments, surgeries and learning to walk again, Miriam kept her mind on the goal. “I didn’t want to let fear overpower living, whatever the future held,” she says.

With a focus on healing of the mind, body and spirit, this real, strong woman stepped into her hospital’s art therapy center – and came out of it with a new life as an artist.



MIRIAM WITH HER ARTWORK IN THE MOFFITT CANCER CENTER ART GALLERY

## TWO DIAGNOSES

For 22 years before her diagnoses, Miriam was focused on her career, owning and running an environmental consulting company with her husband. She traveled across the country, writing and designing program plans with local governments and corporations for solid waste management and conservation.

It was work she continued even after she received her first cancer diagnosis of triple negative breast cancer, a rare and aggressive type of breast cancer that typically affects younger women and minority women. According to the American Association for Cancer Research, breast cancer is the most common cancer in Latina women; Miriam, a Guatemalan American, was the fifth and youngest woman in her family to be diagnosed. She underwent chemotherapy treatment

and had a double mastectomy that has kept her in remission for 10 years.

Miriam learned she was a BRCA carrier – a person who has the mutated gene linked to breast cancer that also leads to a higher-than-average chance of developing a second cancer – and had her ovaries removed due to her increased likelihood for ovarian cancer. But soon, she went back to her doctor when she was not feeling right, wondering if her breast cancer had returned. This time, it wasn't breast cancer. It was a second primary cancer – bone cancer, specifically chondrosarcoma in her left pelvis.

This second primary cancer was also rare and aggressive, but it was localized, so Miriam decided to have an internal hemipelvectomy. This involved removing much of her left pelvis, her hip ball and the top third of her





femur, and then rebuilding it all using a bone cadaver, a titanium hip ball, and metal plates and screws to hold it all together. It took two years of daily physical therapy and rehabilitation for Miriam to get to a “new normal” of living and resulted in a lifelong disability.

“That left me in a situation where I couldn’t do my full-time job in a successful career I had built,” she says. “I had to relearn how to sit up, stand and walk. I had to quarantine my life with one goal – the new cadaver pelvis to heal and take, and to walk again. My focus on health became my new full-time career.”

Today, Miriam’s left leg holds her up, but she cannot lift it. However, she says she is grateful to still have her leg and a new pelvis and hip. She uses adaptive equipment for walking depending on the distance she must travel and her energy level, and a body and ankle brace for body and bone support.

Miriam knows that to fight her disability’s wear and tear on her body along with natural aging, she has a lifetime of rehabilitation ahead and tries to stay as healthy as she can. Her daily mantra is simple: “All we can do is try and move forward every day in whatever capacity we have.”

What’s Miriam’s secret to this outlook after all she has been through?



## THREE AREAS OF HEALING

For Miriam, the key to moving forward after two cancers, multiple surgeries and treatments, and body loss has been focusing on healing her whole self – mind, body and spirit.

After her breast cancer diagnosis, Miriam began writing about her journey and advocating in her community for life over cancer. Due to her Guatemalan American heritage, her husband gave her the honorary title of the “Guatemalan Globes,” and she began to advocate about the importance of integrative medicine practices alongside traditional medicine.

“It’s not just about the treatment and surgery,” Miriam explains. “It’s about the healing that has to happen on a lot of levels, from a spiritual foundation, nutrition, medically monitored supplements and meditation to movement.”

Miriam uses these techniques in a daily practice as part of her self-care routine; she explains that while her routine may not be perfect, this daily practice reminds her that she is only one day away from regaining a self-care rhythm. Nutrition and movement play a critical role in her daily practice of managing her body and having a sense of control; additionally, nutrition and weight are known to play a critical role in keeping breast metastasis



at bay. She explains, “There are just simple things we can do in our lives and our own culture that don’t have to be so radical we think we’ll fail.”

Equally important is her mindset, which has been molded by her faith.

“As my friends say, I don’t preach to them, but my way of communicating my faith or any of this is the way I live,” Miriam shares. “Having faith in yourself and not being ashamed of your own story...[has] been a big part of finding a balance of reconciling when so much loss happens repeatedly.”

Through her advocacy and openness in sharing her story, Miriam works every day to keep her spirit alive. She has presented her story in her community, throughout the state of Florida and even internationally.

“My story is no bigger than anyone else’s,” she says. “Everyone’s story of loss or health crisis is big in their own life and within their own intimate circle.”

When chondrosarcoma forced Miriam to make a 180-degree life change, she explains it was important for her to find a new purpose. But she never thought that purpose would be found in black and white lines drawn on a page.



## ONE LIFE-CHANGING PRACTICE OF ART

It was during her breast cancer treatments that Miriam discovered the power of art. Moffitt Cancer Center (MCC) has an Arts in Medicine Program, with a studio just down the hall from the waiting room where Miriam sat day after day for her many appointments. To take her mind away from fear – and to avoid sitting on her phone – she wandered into the studio.

Miriam knew from her career that she was creative, but she could never forget being told in the eighth grade that she wasn’t an artist. “I thought the arts weren’t for me and science and math were,” she says. “But it was always there, kindling in everything I did.”

The studio – filled with art tools of every kind, from watercolors to expressive arts – was created for patients to “inspire, comfort, encourage and empower.” Trained staff and artists-in-residence guide patients’ process as desired, but the only goal is to express and create without judgement.

“They’re not telling you prescriptively how to be an artist, and I think that was probably what lifted the curtain for me,” Miriam recalls. “I think the fact that there wasn’t any pressure and to just *be* and create with whatever feeling and emotion you’re bringing to the





MIRIAM SPEAKING AT THE OPENING OF HER GALLERY AT MOFFITT CANCER CENTER

table – that was an opening to create from the heart.”

Miriam would stop at the studio anytime she was at MCC. One day, an artist-in-residence suggested she try the Zentangle Art Method (ZAM). Developed by Maria Thomas and Rick Roberts, this relaxing and meditative art style is about creating “tangles” – pen strokes of dots, lines and curves that combine into a pattern – on pieces of paper called “tiles.”

Miriam told the artist that she had tried ZAM previously and decided it wasn’t for her. She remembers sharing, “I’m really having a hard time bringing black ink to white paper right now. I’m in a dark place about disability.” The artist then sent Miriam home with a white pen and black paper instead, and Miriam says she began “to bring lightness to my brown skin.”

“What happened was I did 300 pieces in six months to help battle my severe insomnia from the heavy pain meds I was on,” Miriam says.

ZAM is intentionally unplanned, allowing the artist to focus on just the hand and the line movement, letting the final design be a surprise. During those six months, Miriam was almost entirely immobile. ZAM became a meditative process that helped her then – and something she still practices almost daily.

“Yoga for the mind,’ as it is often called, has helped me with mind, body and spirit self-care too,” she says.

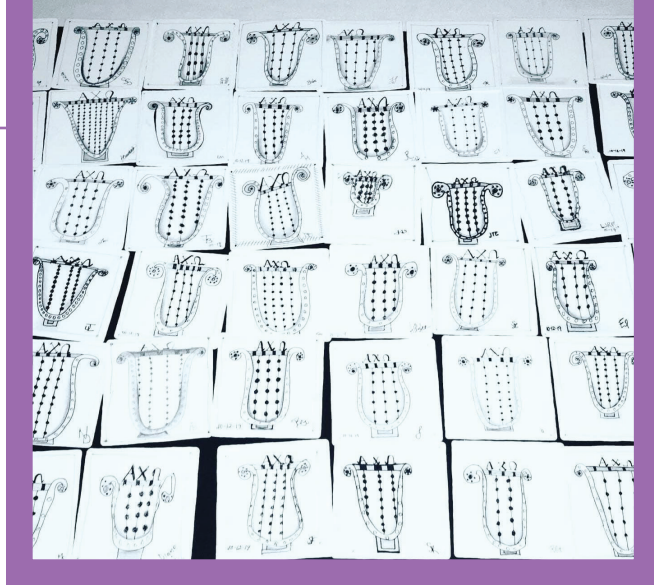
When Miriam got back in touch with the art studio, she brought some pieces in. Recognizing she wasn’t an artist who was a patient but was a patient who had found the healing arts, MCC asked Miriam to create a gallery of her art with the senior curator of the local university’s art museum to share her healing arts journey of loss. The gallery stayed up for a year and had been rotating annually around various locations in the community until the pandemic began. Some of Miriam’s art was added to the hospital’s permanent art collection, and the rest is in her home.

## A MILLION POSSIBILITIES AS AN ARTIST

Miriam says her right brain bloomed, and she began to explore art even more. She dove into other art mediums, leading to her husband giving her the nickname of “HIPster the Artist,” after her pelvis surgery. Her latest pieces have been a mix-media practice in watercolor, found objects, oil and chalk pastels, ink, and tangling patterns. She explains her art is expressive abstract and ranges from pop art to body loss to botanicals.

“My life journey has been a mixed palette of colors telling the story of my life,” she explains. “You know





LYRES DRAWN IN THE ZENTANGLE ART METHOD, MADE AT THE FOUNDERS' DAY CLASS MIRIAM TAUGHT

the red and green, Alpha Chi, that's part of my life. My colors are still mixing, and I'm excited to see where that journey takes me and what palette evolves."

Through MCC's encouragement, Miriam became a Certified Zentangle Teacher. She began teaching ZAM at libraries, cancer centers and camps to give back to the community – and even transferred classes to Zoom during the pandemic! Her presentations involve sharing the healing power of art and telling her story, and her work has been showcased in galleries across Tampa and at the Florida State Capitol.

"[I share] my own story, that I wasn't an artist," Miriam says. "In all my classes, I have students tell the person on their right, 'You are an artist.' And we always end class with an art mosaic of all the work and say together, 'I am an artist.'"

Miriam is now pursuing an expressive arts certification to expand her teaching abilities to include even more art opportunities for those who want to explore their own individual creativity.

"It took me a long time to say I'm an artist, over time through this journey of understanding what the healing arts really mean to me," she explains. "I have learned myself over 10 years that anything is possible one step and stroke at a time."

Miriam calls herself a "Campiona de la Vida," Spanish for "Champion of Life." Alpha Chi Omega would also call her a real, strong woman, and it's something she

sees in herself too.

"It (Real. Strong. Women.) is probably the most powerful tagline of a sorority out there," she says, "and I'm just so glad it's mine."

Miriam has stayed connected to Alpha Chi Omega throughout her life, starting with serving in college as the Panhellenic delegate and rush co-chair for the Gamma Chi chapter and continuing to present day with the Gamma Phi Gamma (Tampa, Florida) alumnae chapter; she recently shared her story and taught a class to her sisters at the chapter's Founders' Day celebration.

What's next for Miriam on her new journey as an artist? She recently launched her website, *En Casa with Miriam* (Spanish for "At Home with Miriam"), to share her mind, body, spirit and planet care lifestyle. She is planning to finish up her expressive arts certification and develop her practice to share with others. She also hopes to publish a book and poetry detailing her journey. And her mindset continues to center on healing and joy.

"I can truly say that every loss I had, it's actually loss that's brought me substantial gifts I never would have dreamed of, and I'm richer for it in my soul," she reflects. "It's a lesson I learned from my mother, Rosa, who died of breast cancer shortly after I graduated college. She was the real, strong woman example for me."

*Explore more of Miriam's work at [EnCasaWithM.com](http://EnCasaWithM.com) or on Instagram and Facebook at @HIPsterCZT.*

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