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## Artists' work captures struggles with severe illness

When Betty McGeehan of Morristown completed three months of radiation for breast cancer, she felt as if she were flying into a new life. Renowned for her found object artwork, she knew just what to do with that feeling. The result is a work called "Cradle," on exhibit at "Artists Plant Seeds of Hope."

Every piece in this multimedia 12-artist show at Summit Medical Group, curated by Steven Fleisch of Chatham, breaks open the pain and struggles of the artists' encounters with severe illness and lets the life-transforming seeds each discovered spill off their canvases.

McGeehan was amazed at how comforted she was by the blue alpha cradle form that held her still during treatments. It conformed to the contours of her body.

"There I was naked from the waist up, and as I was lying there I thought, My God, this is saving my life," she said. "At the end I asked if I could have the cradle, and the clinicians at Saint Barnabas said yes."

In her Chatham studio she affixed a giant butterfly to the cradle and then surrounded it with artificial flowers. It shows a metamorphosis, which is just how McGeehan felt -- changed, delivered into a new life.

Some of the 35,000 patients who pass through the Berkeley Heights medical campus every month stop to reflect on the images. Fleisch's show is attracting visitors, too.

People ponder the works, said Maureen Bennett, spokesperson for the medical group. They are moved because the medical challenges are presented with short narratives that share the personal stories of the artists, all of whom have enjoyed stature in their field.

Fleisch, 51, is an artist who has turned his attention recently to digital painting. His "Graceful Solitude" -- a closeup of a digitally

altered red cyclamen showing its swirls, textures and gradated rich color -- won Best in Show in this year's Member Show of the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey.

The rebirth the flower symbolizes is a theme Fleisch set out to explore in "Artists Plant Seeds of Hope," which germinated in his mind when his friend Marge died in 2004 after battling three kinds of cancer over eight years. His collage "My Beautiful Friend Marge" shows pictures of her at all stages of her life -- from infancy onward, as she budded into a young woman, a wife, a mother, a sailor, a chemo patient. A panel to the right of the collage features a huge copper heart Fleisch pounded in his studio until a gaping hole was in its center.

The show also features work by Jessica Perry, a Mendham High School art teacher who switched her portrait technique from painting to cut-paper collage after a car accident made it impossible for her to hold a brush.

Indeed Fleisch is no stranger to debilitation. Back-to-back sporting accidents left him flat on his back for nine months in 1995 as his spine slowly healed.

Extending through labyrinthine hallways, the exhibit includes a Hall of Hope -- a gallery of portraits of local cancer survivors, including Chatham Mayor Richard Plambeck, now in remission from leukemia.

"Artists Plant Seeds of Hope" is about bringing people eye to eye with the power of the struggle of the human condition, maybe inspiring some to get diagnostic tests, definitely letting everyone know they need not suffer alone.

More: The public can visit the exhibit at Summit Medical Group, 1 Diamond Hill Road, Berkeley Heights, Mondays through Fridays from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. It runs through January. Call (908) 277-8834.

"Human Interests" appears every Sunday and other days of the week from time to time. In each column Lorraine Ash explores interesting angles on local life that may otherwise escape attention. Reader mail is welcome at [lvash@gannett.com](mailto:lvash@gannett.com).

