

## Artist's battle with cancer sparks healing mission

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EDMONTON

Steven Csorba passed out the first time he saw himself in a mirror after undergoing head-and-neck cancer surgery. "I looked like a monster." Now, with an urgency born from personal pain, the local artist—well-known for his portraits of Oiler greats such as Wayne Gretzky—is fighting to bring Edmonton's cancer researchers together.

Drawing inspiration from his battles with cancer, Csorba is using work begun during his recovery—depictions of vivid balls of energy and question-provoking pop art—to raise \$3.3 million for the new Art of Hope Foundation. "Van Gogh had his ear cut off," Csorba says. "I had doctors cut into my neck." Art of Hope is aimed at facilitating greater collaboration between institutions and programs such as the Cross Cancer Institute's Art in Medicine program and the head-and-neck reconstruction centre at the Misericordia Hospital.



The key is communication and, while he dreams big, Csorba is willing to start small. "I believe Edmonton could become a model, a centre of collaboration. They're amazing at what they do, but they can do better."

Diagnosed in 2003 at 39, Csorba endured 14 hours of surgery and seven weeks of radiation. An active non-smoker, the diagnosis caught him off guard. "You wake up and you're living in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," he says. "It's hell." Csorba lost 70 pounds, 88 lymph nodes, 25 teeth and his saliva. Muscles from his left arm were taken to rebuild his neck. A graft from his right hip replaced lost jaw bone.

In post-surgery weeks on the third floor of the Cross Cancer Institute, swallowing food felt like swallowing knives. Csorba would take three or four hours to psych himself up for his one meal—a blended concoction of Häagen Dazs ice cream, Oreo cookies, peanut butter and protein powder. He drinks at least 40 glasses of water a day, waking every 30 minutes at night to moisten his dry mouth. Scars run down and across his neck.

But as he bounced through the system, receiving treatment throughout the city, Csorba noticed that researchers didn't get many opportunities to get together and brainstorm. With the Art of Hope Foundation, Csorba hopes to look at less tangible areas of research, such as the idea of "**activating hope,**" in which patients could actively engage in their passions rather than let their inherent creativity die.

"**Anything you do as a passion is a medicine,**" Csorba says, adding that the Art in Medicine program has been as important to his recovery as reconstructive surgery.

Csorba asks a question with his art, a question he asks himself even now. "Can a person go through hell and still be happy at the end of the day?" His artistic answer is purposefully ambiguous: Joyous smiles are juxtaposed with showers of radiation and footless devils. Csorba wants his audience to look within themselves to find an answer. On Aug. 16, some of Csorba's pop art will be on display for two weeks at the Peter Robertson Gallery; that two-week show aims to drum up attention for the Sept. 27 Art of Hope fundraiser.

The fundraiser features limited prints of 40 images that revolve around a sphere theme. Csorba describes them as balls of energy—"a sincere way of trying to make your world whole again." With the fundraiser, Csorba hopes organizations will buy the giclee (a fine-art archival ink-jet process) prints and donate them to be hung on hospital walls.

Gallery owner Peter Robertson was only too happy to support Csorba's fundraiser idea. "His process has changed and his view of life has dramatically changed," Robertson says. "And that shows in his art."

Dr. Carol Cass, director of the Cross Cancer, says interdisciplinary collaboration is something "we're ever, ever striving" to do better. But, she adds, the most important thing is how Csorba transformed his experience into a positive force.

These days, living—not survival—is his goal. His three boys and coaching soccer are his driving passions, art is his tonic. "Bill Gates said he believes a cure for cancer already exists," Csorba says. "I agree."

