

THE URGE TO CONTINUE

During my first year here in the College of Design, I was afforded the opportunity to be a teaching assistant for the Southeast Fiber Forum at Arrowmont School of Arts & Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. The forum only spanned three days, with daily class sessions and evening speakers, one of whom was fiber artist Daryl Lancaster. During her presentation, she flashed personal slides and professional slides on the screen, spoke about the idea of parallel threads leading parallel lives and how the personal and the artistically professional are inexorably intertwined. Her fiber work was personal and painful, but she was resilient in her defense of sharing it all:

It isn't what happens in your life, but what you do with it. By sharing my own journey, especially the dark parts, I found others were helped by the affirmation that they weren't alone and it helped me to work through my own pain because I knew that by sharing it others benefited. By talking about it it became so much less scary and opened the door for others to identify with issues they had in their own lives. (Lancaster)

Every time I make something that someone else views and bears witness to, they carry that emotion with them. I have spoken, made, presented and cried about grief, death and dying in my work, and I have increased the conversation about grief in my circle of colleagues, friends and family.

Throughout this project, I kept rediscovering that people want to share their stories of loss and grief, of impending loss, of familiarity with pain, death and suffering. The compulsion to share our experiences and our stories is part of what makes us so uniquely human—that desire to connect, on the human-to-human level. During the question and answer portion of my oral defense, there were many personal stories shared—about relatives with Alzheimer's or dementia, stays in hospitals, witnessing death. Even in a room full of people who did not necessarily have familiarity or relationships with each other, there existed that compulsion to share and to allow others to hear personal experiences.

My work in this arena is not done. This work will always continue in some capacity. The ongoing goal of my research and partnership with Hospice of Wake County is to continue to create installations of my response to the experiences of being with dying patients and listening to their stories. I do not yet know what else will come from this partnership, but I do know that by collecting these stories of the dying, their legacies, and sharing the pain of others, my work serves more of a purpose.

This project is instilling in me the lesson that resilience is a necessary attribute for a community-outreach artist, but that collaboration with non-profits, with colleagues or with acquaintances can result in a strengthened sense of empathy. This project demonstrated to me that full control of anything is unattainable. There will always be unknowns and unknowables, and you must align your project parameters and scope to give room for the unknowns.

By documenting outreach practices in an under-represented community in research—hospice patients—this project adds to existing arts and community outreach research. Ultimately, after the conclusion of my collaboration with HOWC, the project will have provided a resource for other hospice programs in that it will offer a possible plan of implementation for documenting and translating the legacies of hospice patients. The project aimed and continues to aim to facilitate the grieving process of hospice patients and their families, as well to inform the local community about hospice—goals that sustain me throughout this work.