Unexpected Journeys: Life, Illness and Loss

With advances in medical techniques and increased life expectancies, many people are living longer with progressively degenerating diseases, while others are taking on the role of giving end-of-life care to someone they love. What does it mean to live with terminal illness or to become a caregiver for a family member?

“Unexpected Journeys” offers a thoughtful contemplation of these questions, pairing stunning view camera portraits with written interview excerpts and audio from women with metastatic cancer, and family caregivers, who have lived these journeys firsthand.

EXHIBITION / The exhibit was held at the Vermont Folklife Center’s Vision & Voice Gallery from January–May 2015, and is available to travel to traditional and non-traditional exhibit spaces around the state.
Unexpected Journeys Exhibit Specifications

Description

Photographer Susan Alancraig created this body of work in response to the final months of her parents’ lives to, in her words, “understand more about what they were going through—both to better care for them and to gain a handle on death within the context of my own life and my breaking heart.”

To that end, Susan interviewed and photographed six women with metastatic cancer. Each shared her experience of what living with an expanding cancer—sometimes after many years—had been like, and how it had changed her life.

Later, after being a primary caregiver for her parents during each of their deaths, Susan also interviewed and photographed other family caregivers in order to hear the stories of their experiences with their loved ones, families, medical community, their own identities, and with death.

Susan’s motives speak to the soul of our exhibit program, the pressing need to see, hear, and feel the experiences of others, to achieve empathy and understanding so that we may ourselves lead fuller lives while truly caring for one another. Susan’s research “subjects” were her teachers, and there is much we can learn from her work with them.

As Susan observes, “To tell our stories can be a powerful tool. It can help us gain clarity and insight into our own lives, and can serve as a means of passing on our learnings to others. Most importantly, sharing our stories can be empowering by giving voice to who we are and what we have gone through. To be heard means that we are important, that we are of value, and that we have something to offer to others.”

Content

Photographs – 21 black-and-white, 4x5 negative, digitally printed pigment-based ink prints, framed (16x20 in); 15 of 21 photographs depicting caregivers for a family member at the end of life (7 Horizontal, 8 Vertical), and 6 of 21 photographs depicting women with metastatic cancer (4 Horizontal, 2 Vertical).

Audio Interview Excerpts – Six interview excerpts explore the individual experiences of the six women with metastatic cancer photographed in the exhibition—excerpts range from approximately 1:30 seconds to 3 minutes. Excerpt prompts displayed on 7x5 inch text panels; delivered via a cell phone call-in system.

Text panels – 3 introductory panels: One introducing the general exhibition (24x41 in), one introducing “Family Caregivers” (23x17 in), and one introducing “Women With Metastatic Cancer” (23x17 in); 60 quote panels with excerpts from interviews with family caregivers (ranging between 11x9 in and 7x5 in); 6 text panels introducing women with metastatic cancer (12x10 in); dedicatory text panel (5x7 in); epilogue panel (17 x29 in).

Reference the following pages to see photographs and audio panels.

Public Programming

Artist Talk – Photographer Susan Alancraig speaks to the inspiration, process, and culmination of the project.

Program on Caregiving – Organized by Addison County Home, Health & Hospice, the program facilitated a discussion with Susan Alancraig about caregiving with caregivers.

Additional projects may be proposed in partnership with artist Susan Alancraig and the Vermont Folklife Center.
Unexpected Journeys *Exhibit Specifications* (continued)

**Exhibit Press**


**Fees**

The exhibit is available for loan for a fee to be negotiated based on the unique conditions of each host.

**Exhibit Layout**

The following images display examples of the photo and text layouts of the two different sections of the exhibit, Family Caregivers and Women With Metastatic Cancer:
Exhibit Content Photographs
All photographs black-and-white, 4x5 negative, digitally printed pigment-based ink prints, framed.

FAMILY CAREGIVERS: 16in. x 20in. – 15 photographs (8 vertical, 7 horizontal)
Exhibit Content *Photographs* (continued)
All photographs black-and-white, 4x5 negative, digitally printed pigment-based ink prints, framed.

FAMILY CAREGIVERS: 16in. x 20in. – 15 photographs (8 vertical, 7 horizontal)
Exhibit Content *Photographs* (continued)
All photographs black-and-white, 4x5 negative, digitally printed pigment-based ink prints, framed.

WOMEN WITH METASTATIC CANCER: 16in. x 20in. – 6 photographs (4 horizontal, 2 vertical)
“Seeing him diminish, having to lose the person I loved and relearn how to love the person who was coming up was the hardest. And not having time to grieve who I lost because I was busy caring for his immediate needs. So my lover, my best friend, the man that I married, was no longer there.”

“People have this taboo about talking about death. They can talk about birth – that’s all over the place – but when it comes to dying, nobody wants to talk about it. And it’s such an important time. It’s such a spiritual time. It can be as beautiful as birth, if people can pull together and make it happen that way.”

“Our lives became filled with doctor’s appointments and treatments... Sometimes it just seemed like we had no time for ourselves. It took us much longer to do things, like just to get out of bed and get her dressed and get her ready to go someplace. Sometimes it took well over one hour, sometimes two hours... Our days were just consumed with all this medical stuff.”

“We’re just not taught culturally how to deal with death, just to be comfortable with it, as opposed to how do we live our life in a way that we can feel complete and finished.”

“Losing my sense of self while taking care of my mother wasn’t something I realized was going on until after she had died.”

“Where were the people [at palliative care]? Why were they not sitting us down as a family and saying these are the steps we’re going to take?. . . There was no communication. . . I wanted to be by his side. I wanted to be holding his hand, not having to go talk to doctors and nurses, not having to explain to his family. . . Somebody else needed to do it.”
“Everyone has to come to their own understanding...”
- Helen

To hear this audio interview excerpt, use your phone to call (802) 922-9259, then dial the following extension: 505

“My biggest fear is a little bit of everything.”
- Laura

To hear this audio interview excerpt, use your phone to call (802) 922-9259, then dial the following extension: 503

“Who am I now?”
- Rena

To hear this audio interview excerpt, use your phone to call (802) 922-9259, then dial the following extension: 506

“This is where I’m meant to be...”
- Virginia

To hear this audio interview excerpt, use your phone to call (802) 922-9259, then dial the following extension: 502

“If I could become more comfortable with the thought of death...”
- Debra

To hear this audio interview excerpt, use your phone to call (802) 922-9259, then dial the following extension: 501

“Cancer teaches you, if you listen...”
- Hazel

To hear this audio interview excerpt, use your phone to call (802) 922-9259, then dial the following extension: 504