

Art vs. cancer

THE CREATIVE CRUSADE OF OUTDOOR PAINTER JUDY STACH



Set up an easel to paint outdoors around here, and a breeze may blow your brushes away. A passerby may pepper you with questions. You may even get wet.

That's OK with Judy Stach. "I've learned," she says, "that there is very little in life we can control."

For Little Silver resident Stach, 58, the outdoors teaches spiritual acceptance. She practices a school of painting called "en plein air"—French for "in the open air." In four decades of making and selling her art, she's become expert at beachscapes, garden scenes and taking life as it comes. But acceptance doesn't mean passivity: She also knows how to bring her fellow artists together to fight *for* life—against cancer.

Stach works in oils, and her distinctive art can be seen in galleries in New Jersey, Florida and Georgia (and on the web at www.judystach.com). Plein Air Painters of the Jersey Coast, a group she started

in 2004 that now boasts 90 members, is one of several organizations across the country that honor a tradition begun by the Barbizon School and Impressionist painters in 19th-century France. Those pioneers threw aside centuries of artistic convention (and took advantage of newly invented portable paint tubes) to take painting outdoors so they could record not just the forms of nature, but its moods of mutable light too.

When Stach's best friend died of breast cancer five years ago, she searched for ways her art might help others with the illness. First she organized her fellow artists to contribute money raised from art shows to cancer research. Then, this winter, Stach was asked by organizers of the Two Rivers Antiques Show and Garden Tour if the garden at her home could be exhibited. She quickly agreed when she learned the tour would raise funds for Monmouth Medical Center's Jacqueline M. Wilentz Comprehensive Breast Center.

"This is a way for me to work through my sadness," Stach explains, "and also do something for others." She secured an invitation for members of Plein Air Painters to set up their canvases in the featured gardens during the tour, with a portion of the proceeds from any paintings sold going to the Wilentz Center.

Soon administrators at the center contacted her about bringing the art indoors—as an exhibit.

"It was an excellent facility, but like most medical centers it had walls that were very plain, white and dull," says Stach. "They asked me if our artists could help them add color and life to the space." Thanks to Stach's efforts, the Plein Air Painters now have a rotating exhibition in the Wilentz Center that began in May—again, with artists donating a portion of the proceeds for each painting sold. "Some of our painters have gone through cancer treatment themselves," says Stach. "Others have loved ones who have experienced it, and they really want to help."

For Stach, whose two children are in their 20s, painting can now be a full-time activity—and a year-round one too, thanks to the second home she and her husband, Paul, own in Vero Beach, Florida. ("It's the Jersey Shore with palm trees," she says.) She's grateful that the special calling of her life may help in a tiny way to extend the lives of others.

"I think everybody is an artist," she says. "People just have different ways of expressing it." ■