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Atlanta Grant

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Nuestra Comunidad: Program aims to make cancer patients feel beautiful

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When doctors told Marcela Del Valle she didn't have much time left to live, her hair had completely fallen out due to an intense process of radiation and chemotherapy, and she barely recognized herself in the mirror. Then, in the same place where so many times she had been the recipient of bad news, a small ray of hope surfaced.

Through Cancer Support Community, a non-profit dedicated to providing programs and activities of support, Del Valle found out about a workshop where patients are given the opportunity to make bracelets.

"I was really depressed and that lifted my spirits, because I saw that everyone was in the same situation, and the bracelet was a beautiful piece of art," said Del Valle.

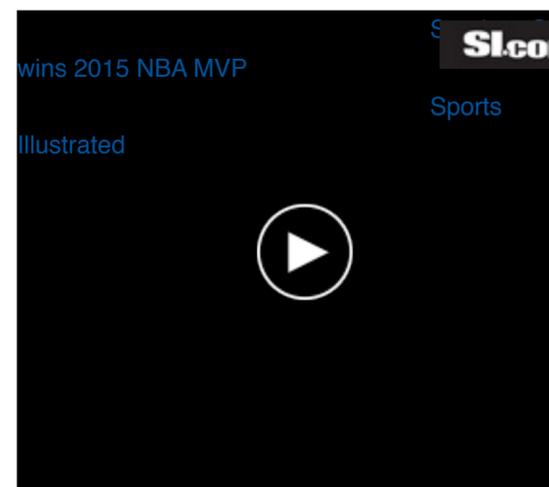
A "work of compassion" is how this cancer survivor describes Feel Beautiful Today, a program which offers handmade jewelry to cancer patients and also visits hospitals so that patients themselves can learn to make the accessories.

The program began five years ago when its founder, Biviana Franco, received a phone call from a friend with cancer who had recently suffered the amputation of her leg due to the disease. Franco found herself asking, "What can I do to tell my friend: feel beautiful, you're going through a hard time but you're going to get through it."

Franco, an artist and native of Colombia, was inspired to put her talent into helping cancer patients. "This program is about much more than a bracelet. This program has the ability to bring love and hope, to bring a nice moment to a patient who is full of problems, who can only think about diagnoses," she said.



Feel Beautiful manufactures bracelets for cancer patients. Some of these pieces of jewelry are made by patients or volunteers of the organization.



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The program has benefitted not only women but male participants as well. “When your hair starts falling out from chemotherapy, when you lose your eyebrows and eyelashes, you start to feel less attractive,” said Bobbie Meneg, who suffered breast cancer. “For her to take the time and allow us to disconnect from chemotherapy and all of the difficulty that comes with the diagnosis and have the opportunity to make this beautiful bracelet, it helps you emotionally and it helps you to feel beautiful.”

For Franco, the greatest reward is feeling a patient’s hug or hearing the heartfelt words of gratitude and appreciation she receives, such as when a patient tells her “I feel like a normal person for a little while.”

Franco has successfully expanded her program to 15 hospitals in the Atlanta area, including Northside, Emory and Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, and she hopes to continue growing. Through her unique brand of art therapy, Franco was able to serve close to 1,000 patients last year.

“There are difficult days where I say: “where am I going to get the money? I don’t know how many more hours I can work and I don’t know where I’m going to get the money, but this is worth it,” said Franco.

DaVida Lee-Williams, Director of Guest and Volunteer Services at Winship Cancer Institute of Emory Center has witnessed firsthand the positive impact that Feel Beautiful Today has on patients. “For that moment in time when they are able to create the bracelet, it gives them the opportunity to not think about what is going on in that moment, to realize ‘I can do this.’ It create smiles, it creates this warm feeling. Sometimes it creates tears of joy.”

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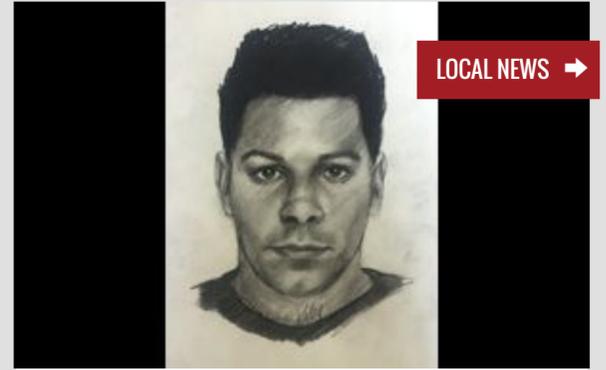
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