
ONLY CONNECT CAT VASKO

Before she was diagnosed with ocular melanoma in her left eye in 2005, [Laurie Lavenhar](#) never thought of herself as an artist. "I worked with women in crisis for thirteen years," she says, "and I'd do creative things on the side, like floral arranging, but I couldn't draw." She laughs. "That's what's so ironic about all of this."

Ocular melanoma is exceedingly rare: only one person in 600,000 will develop the disease, and the most effective form of treatment—which involves removing the affected eye, sewing radioactive seeds onto its surface, and then replacing it—still leaves patients with a 95% chance that they'll go blind in that eye within five years. Lavenhar doesn't think her left eye has much time left: "It started to deteriorate with my close-up vision, and then my peripheral vision started to close in, like a shutter on the side of my eye that's now approaching the midline," she says.

Lavenhar's melanoma was discovered while she was in the hospital for a disc replacement surgery. Bedridden during her recovery, she picked up an art pad and a pen and began to draw. "I thought, I'm going to draw myself out of this black hole," she recalls. "I picked up the pen and what came out were eyes. It was just ink on white paper, but it was so powerful and therapeutic."

Hip-hop artist Jeffrey Perdomo, a.k.a. LAZ (short for Lazarus), diagnosed in 2006 with ALL leukemia, has been in remission since 2008; he uses the same word as Lavenhar to describe the way cancer has impacted his music. "I was always doing music before, but after getting diagnosed and going through treatment, I finally had a purpose," he says. "At the end of the day, it was therapeutic for me to be able to put all my feelings and pain on paper and express myself that way. I wrote over 80 songs while I was sick in the hospital. The producer would bring the drum machine and we'd just go."

I'm here to make history

Let's rejoice in my victory

No damn disability ever going to stop my ability, my drive, my agility

My mindset and creativity

The arts are equally therapeutic for those whom cancer has touched indirectly. After watching a close friend lose her battle to breast cancer at a young age, Mike Moroz wrote

a feature-length movie about the difficulties faced by young women confronting a cancer diagnosis. "Watching Diane go through the journey that is cancer, it was the first time I had been so close to the disease," he says. "I understood academically the impact that cancer has, but I never experienced it in a personal way. The movie isn't autobiographical, but in a broader sense, it is reflective of the journey itself for young women."

Moroz's film, [Face the Sun](#) looks at one young mother's battle with the disease. In a key scene, Mike Anderson, her husband, attempts to explain his wife's condition to their young daughter:

JENNIFER

Mom told Auntie Claire that she doesn't want to do it anymore. What doesn't she want to do?

MICHAEL

Well... sweetheart, you know how mom has been sick for a long time?

JENNIFER

Yeah.

MICHAEL

And she's been going to the hospital a lot to try and get better?

Jennifer nods.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)

And she lost all her hair?

JENNIFER

And then we shaved ours!

MICHAEL

Yeah and you shaved yours...well, all that medicine isn't making her any better...some of the medicine even makes her feel worse, and we can't seem to find any medicine to help get better...so mom doesn't want to take any more medicine...

JENNIFER

What will happen if she doesn't?

Nashville, TN-based singer [Hope Cassity](#) has been seeing a childhood friend through a strikingly similar situation: three months after getting married, the friend was diagnosed with a semi-operable brain tumor, and has since been undergoing radiation and chemotherapy to try to destroy the remaining cancer. "When she started losing her hair, her husband shaved his head with her," Cassity says. Meanwhile, Cassity's grandmother is facing a recurrence of breast cancer that has spread to her bones. "I was so worried about her, and she told me, 'I'm not going anywhere. I've gotta be here for your grandpa.'"

Watching two of her loved ones battle cancer at the same time-and witnessing the love that helped get them face the disease-Cassity was inspired to write her song "50 Years." "I was really inspired by the power and the strength they have with their love," she says. "The song is about that strength and how it pulls them through this battle." In the song's refrain, Cassity sings:

*She says it's been 50 years
and he's never left my side
He needs me here to kiss him goodnight
So baby, don't you worry
I ain't going nowhere
cuz your grandpa needs me right here*

Taylor Grey, a children's book author from Memphis, wrote her first book after volunteering with pediatric cancer patients at St. Jude Hospital. "My dad has cancer when I was little, and I remember him talking about how important visualization was to recovery," she recalls. "As an adult patient, you're taught to do that; but kids aren't, and they have the best imaginations." In Grey's first book, [A Wig for Ally](#) after a little girl named Ally loses her hair during cancer treatment, her parents take her to a wig shop and buy her four different wigs. Each wig allows her to make believe she's someone different: a superhero, a spy, a magician.

"Then, when her hair starts to grow back, her doctor makes the comment to her that she's his hero," Grey explains. "She thinks about it and realizes he didn't call Ally the magician or Ally the supergirl a hero-it was just her." Grey has a second book, [A Hat for Harry](#) coming out this summer. "For so long, I'd volunteered and wanted to give something back," she says. "I hope I'm somehow able to raise money for cancer and do things for kids through this book. If I can help people by doing this, I think that's amazing."

In fact, Lavenhar, LAZ, Moroz and Cassity have all focused their cancer-inspired artistic endeavors on giving back: connecting to cancer patients and their loved ones through the experiences they all share. Cassity plays benefit concerts, while LAZ performs every month for kids at Mt. Sinai through the hospital's in-house TV studio. Moroz intends to donate all proceeds from "Face the Sun" to cancer research, and Lavenhar illustrates cards with positive, supportive messages for cancer patients, donating 10% of sales to cancer organizations.

"Cancer patients aren't surprised by hearing the word 'cancer,'" Lavenhar notes. "When you have a major illness, you don't want people to make less of it: it's a huge part of who you are. We wanted those touched by cancer to be able to communicate, to know they're not alone."

Cat Vasko is a freelance journalist.