

Labors of love for bra artists

BY BOB FLAHERTY STAFF WRITER

NORTHAMPTON - Some of the 230 bra sculptures on display at the Show Us Your Bra show - like the matching teacups designed by Tammy Lee McCaffrey - draw the viewer into something personal, fragile and life-affirming.

'My Aunt Kathy Frank died of breast cancer ... This is in memory of her battle,' McCaffrey writes on her entry form. 'She was classy and loved pearls and we both liked to collect teacups.'

The cups in the display belonged to Frank, and the pearls to her grandmother, Marguerite Parsons, of Hartford. Both women died of cancer; Frank died Sept. 21, 2006, of breast cancer.

McCaffrey is one of about 230 'bratistes,' as organizers call the bra-makers whose work will be on display at the Northampton Center for the Arts through the end of the month in a benefit for the Breast Fund, a nonprofit that supplies prosthetic breasts to under-insured or non-insured women who've undergone mastectomies.

The show, now in its ninth year, has the bratistes create brassieres out of unlikely materials, found objects or just about anything else. The bras are then auctioned at the gala, planned for Saturday night, and the proceeds sent to the Breast Fund. Many of the bratistes, like McCaffrey, 42, of Springfield, have highly personal connections to the cause.

She said it was her grandmother, who died of cancer 20 years ago, who started the practice of having formal tea parties for the females in the family. McCaffrey and her Aunt Kathy made it a yearly tradition, right down to the long white gloves.

'They taught me grace and wisdom,' said McCaffrey. 'I've never known anyone so elegant as my Aunt Kathy. She always wore pearls. She taught us to sip properly: A lady always hold her pinkie out, the hand holds the bottom of the cup or saucer, the cup comes up, you never go to it, and don't slurp!'



CAROL LOLLIS

Bras are displayed in the Show Me Your Bra art show at the Center for the Arts in Northampton.

And Kathy Frank taught something even more valuable to McCaffrey, who has two grown children of her own and a 4-year-old granddaughter. 'Mostly I learned to be an understanding mother, to never forget what it's like to be a kid. To live a dream and follow it,' she said. 'And every day, you've got to tell someone you love them. Every day.'

Event has grown

Since its humble beginnings as a fun promotion in 1998, the event has gotten big, make that a 48DD-cup big, and its founder, Judith Fine, owner of the Gazebo, had to hire an event coordinator, Jennifer Lind, to process the record-breaking 230 bras submitted.

'I was blown away by the sheer number of entries,' said Lind. 'We got them from as far way as Arizona, Ohio, California and Texas.'

'This event is about giving dignity to a woman living with this diagnosis,' added Fine. 'Any woman who wants a prosthesis will get a prosthesis.'

Certainly a serious cause, but that's no reason the artist and show organizers can't have a lot of fun putting it on.

People at Saturday's gala will be treated to the sight of bras depicting troll faces, bras with the Olsen Twins, race cars, flying ghosts, and Luciano Pavarotti's head emerging from one side while singing to the opposite side, which has the bowtie and tux, but no head. A sequel to 'The Vagina Monologues' has two sides of a bra holding a conversation: 'So Joyce,' says the left one, 'I've been drooping around the house these days - how do you stay so perky?'

One is made of the jockstraps and protective cups used by males in contact sports. And one, 'The Stripnotist's Hypnotits,' has red fluorescent swirls on a black background. Linger on it a second too long and you could be transfixed as Jimmy Stewart in 'Vertigo.' Meanwhile, 'Big Boobs' features a smiling President Bush on one side and a smiling Dick Cheney on the other, created by a mother/daughter team from Hatfield.

The stories behind the bras could make up an event of their own.

In Bra-Band, eight cancer survivors made their bras as a group, like quilters in a bee, and stitched them together to make one. One of the eight, Kristen Martinez, 32, described finding the ominous lump on her breast: 'You self-diagnose,' she writes. 'It's just a muscle pull or whatever.' Six months later she received a diagnosis, and called her brother, sobbing, 'It's Stage IV. 'Out of how many?' he asked. And I said, 'IV!' Radiation and chemotherapy have shrunk her tumor, giving her hope. Another of the eight, GERALYN Lucas, renamed her plastic surgery reconstruction photos 'breast mug shots.'

Then there's 'Mountain Bike Gal,' featuring a bra made entirely from the chains and gears of a bike, mounted over a collage of healthy, vibrant women and girls riding. Its creator, Jim Barretti of West Springfield, describes himself as a proud husband of a breast cancer survivor and he himself a prostate cancer victor.

Laura Kowal dedicates 'Hog Wild', which features 30 hungry pigs circling two stacks of hay, to the wild spirit of an aunt who died of cancer.

Many of the bratistes will be at the Gala Saturday, including McCaffrey, who plans to wear long gloves, a '50s dress and the pillbox hat, in honor of her aunt and grandmother.

'I wouldn't miss it for the world,' she said.

Kathy Frank was from Chicopee and was first diagnosed with breast cancer in 1998, but the disease went into remission for seven years before coming back with a vengeance in 2005. And in her illness, she taught her niece profound lessons as well.

'She never complained,' said McCaffrey. 'Always upbeat and uplifting. She did all the charity walks. I remember saying, 'She's gonna beat this.' We thought she was beating it. She always looked good. Always dressed up. Even if she was just going to spend the day on the sofa or in bed, she made herself presentable, right up to the last day. When she passed, I was devastated and scared.'

Though she faithfully has a breast exam every October, a scare McCaffrey got a few years back turned out to be 'The longest week of my life. They tell you your options. You first think about what you might lose; what makes you a woman is gone. But then you forget all that. It's better to be alive.'

The tea parties nowadays are held in Frank's honor, said McCaffrey. 'We meet every year just before Christmas, all my nieces. We talk about boys, husbands, the future.'

Show Us Your Bra is expected to be a sellout. Tickets can be purchased at Gazebo in downtown Northampton.