The Protectors

Child abuse is a heartbreaking daily reality in our pediatric emergency department. Meet the team that's first on the scene. PAGE 22
TOUCHED BY AN ANGEL

Over the past 25 years, stained glass artist Bobbie Burnett and her committed cadre of volunteers have raised more than $750,000 for cancer patient care and research.

By Marlene England

ARTIST BOBBIE BURNETT is the first to admit she’s not very good with numbers. “I’m a people person—not a business person,” she laughs. “I measure percentiles in hugs.”

Even so, Burnett has a few figures committed to memory. Once a year, 7,000 pounds of art glass packed in five-foot-wide crates are delivered via 18-wheeler to her Annapolis, Maryland, studio. It is that same studio where approximately 90 volunteers come together—some as often as three times a week—to create stained glass angels for the Caring Collection, Inc., the nonprofit Burnett founded 25 years ago. Since then, more than 36,000 of these handcrafted creations have been sold to raise money for cancer patient care and research at the Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center at Johns Hopkins and the Anne Arundel Oncology Center in Annapolis. To date, the Caring Collection has generated more than $750,000 for the two institutions.

No one is more surprised than Burnett. In December 1982, she designed and created one small stained glass angel to cheer her friend Susie Lytle, who had been diagnosed with leukemia. Burnett made another angel, and then another, and was soon inviting friends to her living room to cut glass, foil edges, solder pieces together, and package angels for shipping. All proceeds helped to pay Lytle’s medical bills.

After Lytle died the next year, the angel project continued—as did Burnett’s commitment to fighting cancer through art and the human touch. “This isn’t my work. It’s my life,” Burnett explains. “And it’s been a metamorphosis—not with butterflies but with angel wings.”

The assembly process quickly outgrew Burnett’s living room and now consumes every inch of her studio, creeping into her garage and spare bedroom as well. She added stained glass sun catchers to the product lineup, along with angel pins and three-inch guardian angels, to ensure that Caring Collection products were affordable for everyone—since, as she points out, cancer shows no favoritism. Prices range from $15 to $85, and Burnett designs a new angel to add to the collection each year.

“I thought it was a miracle when we reached $100,000, but now I want to reach $1 million,” she avows. “I hope we’ve set an example that any ordinary group of people can do something quite extraordinary. The Caring Collection has been able to touch people all over the world.”

Through media coverage (including an article in Family Circle that generated one of the largest responses in the magazine’s history), word of mouth, gift shop sales, and the nonprofit’s website at caringcollection.org, tens of thousands of people know about the angels and their purpose. The luminous creations have been shipped throughout the United States and to Russia, Australia, Spain, and just about every place in between. Burnett’s husband Jerry, a retired electrical engineer, maintains the ever-expanding mailing list and oversees the shipping operation.

Neither the couple nor the volunteers receive any financial compensation from the Caring Collection. Because expenses are limited to the cost of materials and shipping, approximately 70 percent of all proceeds go directly to patient care and research projects.

“The cost of labor is not a factor for us. We pay our volunteers in jelly beans and pretzels,” laughs Burnett, who routinely ignores suggestions of outsourcing her angel production overseas. “It’s a labor of love, and it’s important that every piece passes through the hands of volunteers who have lots of hope—be-
cause what we do is all about helping people." She continues, "The Caring Collection provides money for patient care and research equipment—and that's very important—but we also provide a wonderful opportunity for people of all ages to work together and become a family."

Burnett has a wealth of heartwarming stories about her "family" and the paths that led each volunteer to the Caring Collection. Her friend Susie's three children remain involved, as do the family members of many cancer patients who received a Caring Collection angel during their illness. One of Burnett's original volunteers moved from Annapolis to Philadelphia but returns for a few days each month, staying with Burnett and lending a hand where needed. Another family has four generations volunteering with the Caring Collection, including a father who has prostate cancer. New to the volunteer lineup is a young man working on his court-ordered community service requirement. Husbands and wives, retirees, and students from church groups and school service clubs frequently offer to help. The age of volunteers ranges from 12 to 91 years.

When a blind woman asked how she could help, Burnett offered to supply the task of stringing all the sun-catchers with fishing line. The volunteer was thrilled to be able to participate and did so until she died from cancer. Another volunteer's job at a Johns Hopkins research lab precludes her from participating in the weekday volunteer work sessions, so Burnett gives her a bucket filled with angel body parts. The volunteer foils the edges in her spare time, and her husband returns the pieces to Burnett's studio on his way to work.

On one morning in February of each year, volunteers flock to Burnett's studio not to make angels but rather to make the tough decision about what projects the Caring Collection will fund in the coming fiscal year. Doctors from both institutions—the Sidney Kimmel Comprehensive Cancer Center and the Anne Arundel Oncology Center—submit a total of eight proposals, which the volunteers study carefully before voting on which ones to fund.

This year, the Caring Collection committed $25,000 to fund the proposal from Fred Bunz, director of the Kimmel Cancer Center's Cell Imaging Core Facility (see p. 53). "The volunteers think about what will have the greatest impact on the greatest number of people, and the equipment that Dr. Bunz requested will be used by more than 90 other investigators," Burnett explains. "Our gift will update equip-
ment, which means the researchers can do their work much faster."

In April, Bunz visited the Caring Collection to receive the contribution and share more details about his project. Volunteers look forward to these annual Presentation Days and have also enjoyed visits to the Kimmel Cancer Center, where they see firsthand the fruits of their labor of love. "That is always a boost of energy for the volunteers," Burnett says. "To see the equipment in action is really exciting, and it makes all of us want to keep doing more."

It's ironic, she admits, that her low-tech, high-touch operation helps to purchase some of the most advanced technology available to cancer researchers today. "I find it interesting how those things can work together, but we don't ever want to give up the human element," she emphasizes. "It's most important for the Caring Collection to provide love, hope, care, and comfort."

Right before the Caring Collection's meeting in February, Burnett received a call from a Delaware woman she's known for 10 years but has never met. The woman works for the company that sells boxes to the Caring Collection. "She called because I'd sent a little angel when I found out her mother had lung cancer," Burnett explains. "She wanted to tell me her mother died holding the angel in her hands." Stories like this mean everything to Burnett and her volunteers. "The money is a wonderful side product of the love, but the love is the No. 1 priority."

Burnett hopes that priority never changes. With her 70th birthday on the horizon, she sometimes contemplates what the future holds for the Caring Collection. "I know I won't be the leader forever," she says. "I'd like to see it continue, but I'm not sure anyone else will want to work six days a week on this."

When Burnett's husband retired, he encouraged her to retire as well. But after battling heart disease and colon cancer, and receiving a stained glass angel from his wife, he changed his mind. "Jerry told me, 'You can never stop making angels because everyone needs them,'" Burnett recalls. "And I believe it's the angels who will lead us in the future. Someone will step in to show the way and help us get where we're going in a direction that will benefit and help the most people."
CARING COLLECTION EQUIPS FOR SUCCESS

Ultraviolet-visible spectrophotometer, palm microdissection unit, real-time polymerase chain reaction instrument... the list of research equipment funded by the Caring Collection is no easy read. But behind the high-tech verbiage is a simple truth: Each piece of equipment is vital to the quest for discovery that keeps the Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center moving forward.

Fred Bunz has to stay one step ahead of today's ever-evolving technology. As director of the center's Cell Imaging Core Facility, he ensures that investigators can see the unseeable—individual cells, tissues, and sub-cellular structures—with sophisticated imaging equipment. "Support from organizations like the Caring Collection is essential to the central mission of what we do here," he said, shortly after learning the nonprofit will be upgrading equipment in the Cell Imaging Facility next year.

"While government grants support many of our day-to-day operating costs, upgrading our technological infrastructure would be all but impossible to do without NIH support alone, especially in the current funding climate."

The Caring Collection's most recent gift of $25,000 will fund replacement of an outdated workstation with a new digital camera, computer, and software package. In the past several years, microscopic imaging—a central component of many cancer research projects—has evolved from a film-based to a digital platform. As image acquisition has grown in sophistication, so have the applications of cell imaging technologies. Bunz, whose own research focuses on the genetic factors that affect the sensitivity of cancer cells to chemotherapy, is eager to use the new state-of-the-art equipment, as are more than 90 other Kimmel Cancer Center investigators.

Six years ago, Kimmel Cancer Center investigator Leisha Emens submitted a winning proposal to the Caring Collection—and the funded equipment remains a critical component of her breast cancer research. The Caring Collection grant enabled Emens to purchase pipettes, water baths, and other basics for her start-up lab, as well as a liquid nitrogen freezer to store patients' white blood cells for her breast cancer vaccine investigations.

With one clinical trial completed and a second under way, Emens has already discovered that the breast cancer vaccine can "retrain" an individual's immune system to seek out and destroy cancer cells, just as it would an infection. This novel immune-based therapy differs from traditional chemotherapy—there's no hair loss, nausea, or other difficult side effects—and because the immune system "remembers," the internal fight against cancer cells begins again at the first sign of tumor growth. Emens hopes her research will result in breast cancer vaccines being routinely used not only to treat the disease but also to prevent it.

"It's only with the support of the community that we can make progress," Emens says. "I think it's awesome that the Caring Collection puts their artistic efforts into creating symbols of hope that help to advance the field of cancer research. We couldn't do it without them."

Every day, Deborah Armstrong and other Hopkins researchers rely on an ovarian cancer tumor tissue bank for their ongoing studies of the disease's molecular and pathologic characteristics. Had it not been for the support of the Caring Collection a decade ago, this powerful research tool might still be on the researchers' wish list.

Armstrong requested funds to start the tissue bank in 1998. In her proposal to the Caring Collection, she explained the importance of being able to correlate a woman's outcome years after her cancer diagnosis with characteristics of her original tumor. A system that would collect, document, and store tumor tissue and track the patients over months and years would also enable researchers to test tumors for factors that weren't known at the time of diagnosis.

"The gift from the Caring Collection allowed us to start this process in ovarian cancer," Armstrong explains, adding that tissue bank studies have resulted in new targeted therapies and more effective screening of the disease. "The Caring Collection's seed money led to further grants from the Department of Defense and the National Cancer Institute to maintain the bank. I can't think of a better way to start the ball rolling in research."

Armstrong had the opportunity to see Bobbie Burnett and the Caring Collection volunteers in action one weekend. "I couldn't believe how many people were there," she recalls. "It was so inspirational to see these people having fun but, at the same time, making a difference in the lives of others whom they would never know. I can't think of a more generous group of people."

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