

Warrior Artist

Shelley Kerr, 65, is an award-winning bronze sculptor who lives with her husband in Fort Collins, Colorado. She has Stage IV bladder cancer.

December 14, 2020 By Shelley Kerr

At my annual physical recently, I was asked what I consider to be an odd question, “How would you rate your general health: poor, fair, good or excellent?”

Hmm, I’m 65 and have Stage IV cancer. I’m excellent.

Seven years ago, I was diagnosed with metastatic bladder cancer. My chance of living five years was 3%. I lost a kidney and my bladder, received a neo-bladder and later went through platinum-based chemo, three immunotherapies, radiation, more surgery and, finally, this amazing new treatment, an antibody-drug conjugate. Each therapy helped me live better—and longer.

People told me that I had a great attitude. But it is not so much that I had a positive attitude; rather, I chose not to have a negative attitude. Cancer feeds off of stress and anxiety, and I wasn’t going to feed it. Instead, I chose to be a warrior. Although it was frightening at times—like looking down the barrel of a gun—I didn’t stay in that place long. I became a seasoned warrior, confident in the choice of whatever weapon got the job done. I’m not done yet!

I am also an artist, which has allowed me to create something beautiful out of this ugly, scary disease. I have emerged as a more creative person, with a different story to tell and different motivations.

Gratitude motivated my To Live sculpture—gratitude toward my doctors and all the researchers, to the people who have supported me and for being alive. How could I positively represent my battle with a disease so destructive and life-threatening? Since modern medicine has roots in ancient Greece, I selected the ancient Greek verb “to live” (ζαωψ). The letters just magnetized into the shape of sculpture. I added a three-sided base with the Greek words for “soul/life” (ψυχη), for “art/skill/technology” (τεχνη) and for “healer/physician” (ψυχη).

The Nebra Sky Swords sculpture was inspired by an early Bronze Age artifact that included swords, daggers and chisels. I was undergoing radiation therapy with billions (perhaps zillions!) of photons being sent into my tumor by a linear accelerator. Sounded like a weapon to me. Nebra Sky Swords represented my emergence as a seasoned warrior.

In early 2019, my doctor at the University of Colorado Cancer Center, Thomas Flaig, MD, shared that an experimental antibody-drug conjugate treatment might work for me. He described it as a Trojan horse. An antibody specific to the tumor is linked with a potent chemo agent. The cell takes it inside (think Trojan horse), and the chemo attacks the cancer cells. I sculpted a Trojan horse to honor this amazing treatment. The title was Breakthrough.

"Breakthrough" Courtesy of Shelley Kerr/Jafe, Inc.

Sometimes, I am a warrior and gratefully have many weapons. Yet I am also on a gentler path that has allowed me to create things of beauty. I choose to handle very scary things with grace, love and creativity. I am blessed in that I can share a message of hope in very tangible ways by demonstrating both the warrior and the artist. To learn more about these three sculptures, see ["How Shelley Kerr Became a Warrior Artist"](#).

