How Shelley Kerr Became a Warrior Artist

The stories behind three sculptures inspired by a Colorado sculptor’s cancer journey.

December 14, 2020 By Bob Barnett

Shelley KerrCourtesy of Shelley Kerr/Crazy Idea Photography

“Sometimes I am a warrior and gratefully have many weapons,” writes sculptor Shelley Kerr in her essay “Warrior Artist” in the winter 2021 issue of Cancer Health. “Yet I am also on a gentler path that has allowed me to create things of beauty.”

Kerr, who has Stage IV bladder cancer, describes how her cancer experience inspired her to create three very different sculptures. We didn’t have space in the magazine essay to show all three, so here they are, along with more insights into their creative origins.

To Live

To LiveCourtesy of Shelley Kerr/Jafe, Inc.

Gratitude was the motivation for this sculpture, Kerr writes in a blog post: “Created as a ‘good news’ message about fighting cancer: the scientific breakthroughs that are rapidly changing the landscape; the passionate and talented doctors and caregivers that fight with us on the front line; the cancer warriors and their families that are fighting the fight every day with strength, courage and grace.’

Since modern medicine has roots in ancient Greece, she selected the ancient Greek verb “to live” (ζαωψ). As she described in her Cancer Health essay, “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).”

Nebra Sky Swords

Nebra Sky SwordsCourtesy of Shelley Kerr/Jafe, Inc.

“The rising warrior: This was one of those times that art and life collided,” writes Kerr in a blog post. It was inspired by an early Bronze Age artifact that included swords, daggers and chisels. She was undergoing radiation therapy with billions of photons being sent into her tumor by a linear accelerator. “Sounded like a weapon to me,” she wrote in her Cancer Health essay, adding, “Nebra Sky Swords represented my emergence as a seasoned warrior.”

Breakthrough

BreakthroughCourtesy of Shelley Kerr/Jafe, Inc.

In early 2019, Kerr’s doctor shared that an experimental antibody-drug conjugate treatment might work for her. 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. She sculpted a Trojan horse to honor this amazing treatment. “I have never sculpted a horse before, and I had a blast building this piece!” she wrote in a blog post about the experience. “So much to celebrate.” Watch a video of the production of Breakthrough below.

To learn more about Shelley Kerr, her life and sculptures, visit Kerr Art Works.

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