

The New Haven Register (nhregister.com), Serving New Haven, CT

Life

20 artists paint Stony Creek Sunday to raise Lyme disease awareness

Thursday, July 9, 2009

By Donna Doherty, Register Arts Editor

BRANFORD — A few years ago, Madison artist Kimberly Ruggiero was so debilitated by the effects of Lyme disease that she couldn't even get out of bed, never mind paint.

Sunday, Ruggiero, her life returned to her by her persistence in getting the right diagnosis and treatment, will be part of Wet Paint Silent Auction, a plein-aire all-day paint-a-thon, hosted by Stony Creek Gallery owner Susan Strickland, also a Lyme disease sufferer.

The fruits of the day of painting (9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.) around the picturesque Stony Creek area of town will be auctioned off, paint still wet, at a reception (admission \$5) at the 152 Thimble Islands Road gallery to raise money for Lyme disease research, specifically the work of University of New Haven biologist and Lyme disease sufferer Eva Sapi, a pioneer in the effects of the borrelia bacteria on the disease.

Twenty artists, including Branford's Robert Reynolds, Margaret Dean, Hannah Baldwin, Molly McDonald and Maureen Wilkenson, Clinton's Jan Blencowe and many Connecticut artists who exhibit at Stony Creek Gallery and at Ruggiero's now-closed Madison gallery, are scheduled to participate.

"I got to be friendly with Kim, and we both have had Lyme disease, and we thought it would be great to do a plein-aire silent-auction fundraiser," says Strickland, whose experience with the disease was not as harrowing as Ruggiero's chronic Lyme disease, but just as painful.

"It was two years ago, and it was terrible. I was dizzy and had a fever and my joints ached. I thought I had MS," says Strickland, who tried acupuncture before she was eventually diagnosed and treated with dioxycillin.

Ruggiero is on a mission to educate the public about the disease, its diagnosis and treatment, which, as her story relates, is often complicated.

"I had to abandon the mainstream medical community to get treatment," she says, noting that in her quest, she saw "a primary-care physician, a rheumatologist, two neurologists, a cardiologist, urologist and gynecologist."

It started with sore joints and escalated to slurred speech and cognitive problems that an early doctor attributed to a spider bite in 2001.

"I had recurrent flu-like symptoms and migraines that would come and go," she says. Eventually, "every body system was affected," the symptoms so severe that, "I literally didn't think I was going to live. I told my husband I wasn't going to make it.

"If treated right away, it can be benign," says Ruggiero, who still maintains a gallery in Stamford at the Connecticut Antiques Center. "If not, it can languish. I had three negative tests."

The National Center for Infectious Diseases of the Centers for Disease Control sets the guidelines for what is a positive test, and therefore insurable. It was those negative tests that cast Ruggiero outside the mainstream medical community seeking answers.

"If you don't meet the guidelines, you're not considered a positive," says Ruggiero.

Because Ruggiero didn't exhibit some classic symptoms, such as the bull's-eye rash, Bell's palsy or swollen knees, and had three negative tests, her cadre of physicians was convinced that it wasn't Lyme.

The CDC believes Lyme disease is easy to treat with antibiotics, says Ruggiero. Sapi's research suggests otherwise.

In studying the borrelia bacteria, transmitted by ticks and said to be the causative agent of Lyme disease, Sapi found it creates a "biofilm" or secretion which makes the bacterium resistant to antibiotics.

Ruggiero says, "I felt like I fell into a hell, into a parallel universe."

That universe was the netherland of what can be a chronic disease that is not readily recognized as such, not unlike fibromyalgia.

Ruggiero finally got a CDC-positive test and took it to infectious disease practitioner, Dr. Steven Phillips of Wilton, who became a Lyme specialist when his own father was diagnosed.

"I was put on IV and oral antibiotics for nine months. I'm still on oral," says Ruggiero, who says the effects were dramatic.

Ruggiero says she doesn't want to castigate the whole medical community, but she makes it clear that she feels that the relationships some doctors have with insurance companies have made them resistant to long-term protocols.

"Some of the doctors writing those guidelines for Lyme are sitting on the boards of insurance companies," said Ruggiero. "We can't just say there's no such thing as chronic Lyme disease, because it's ridiculous in light of this new research."

Sapi will give a talk on her research at 3:30 p.m. at Willoughby Wallace Library, 146 Thimble Islands Road, before the gallery reception. There will be maps of the painting locations, for those who want to watch the artists in action. The unsold paintings will go on exhibit at the gallery or at UNH.

"The event should be fun for the community, helpful for the artists and Eva," says Ruggiero, who hopes it also might help people learn more about Lyme disease.

Note: Andy Abraham Wilson's well-reviewed documentary chronicling the plight of chronic Lyme disease sufferers, "Under Our Skin" (Open Eye Pictures) opens around the country this month. It's at Real Art Ways, 56 Arbor St., Hartford, Friday through Wednesday, with Wilson in a talkback after the 7 p.m. Tuesday screening; call for times: (860) 232-1006).

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