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Weekly Webb: Healing with words, nature's inspiration

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JACI WEBB Of The Gazette | Posted: Friday, November 20, 2009 12:00 am | No Comments Posted



BOB ZELLAR/Gazette Staff [Buy this photo.](#)
 Carol Ward, Audubon Conservation Education Center naturalist at Riverfront Park, leads a group who's lives were touched by cancer on a hike at Riverfront Park November 14, 2009. The group had a writing clinic following the walk.

It was a cheerful bunch.

Seven would-be writers congregated around a table at the Audubon Conservation Education Center near Norm's Island last Saturday, eager to see the island through naturalist Carol Ward's eyes. Over the next hour they would sample eatable berries, learning to differentiate between the tart buffalo berries and the toxic white berries that grow on poison ivy vines. They would wander along the snowy trail crunching cottonwood leaves underfoot while listening for the chickadee's quiet call. But the hidden purpose of their gathering and walk in the snowy woods was to process their feelings about cancer. Everyone in this group had faced cancer, either a loved one's illness or their own.

One woman had just been diagnosed with Stage 1 breast cancer. One man lost his wife to cancer in 2004. Another participant, former mayor Chuck Tooley, fought his battle with cancer six years ago, "and yesterday I did 20 chin-ups," he informed the group.

Billings poet and writing teacher David Caserio led the group with assistance from Billings Clinic Cancer Center counselor Amber Ussin-Davey.

"There is no real pressure to write about cancer," Ussin-Davey said. "We try multiple ways to help our patients, this is using pen and paper. One of the things we see that is so good is the free writing. Sometimes it's so healing and refreshing to just write."

Caserio and Ussin-Davey have partnered up on three previous writing experiences geared to people touched by cancer. They are open to all and free of charge. But last Saturday was the first time they took the students outside.

"The idea is to get outside and see things through someone else's eyes," Caserio said. "One of my favorite poets, Walt Whitman, suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome, even though it

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hadn't been named yet, after fighting in World War I. He believed that nature could heal him."

One writing participant brought a gargoyle and a picture of her late father, who died of cancer. She left it on the table in front of her when she sat down to write about her day. Others didn't bring physical reminders of those they lost, but family members were undoubtedly on their minds that day.

Ward talked of the healing that has gone on during the past decade the 27 acres surrounding the conservation center. The nearby island's namesake, Norm Schaenthal, and other volunteers planted more than 1,000 trees on the acreage and eradicated the aggressive non-native Russian olive tree from the island, allowing native trees to thrive. They dug three ponds to create a wetlands and now animals, birds and plants are returning to the area.

Caserio recommended that the group members keep a journal of some special spot in their yard or nearby, chronicling the space through the seasonal changes like a naturalist would.

"It anchors you to a particular place, a safe place," Caserio said. "You can see the cycles in nature. We always have social and psychological reactions to it."

He invited the group to create a written snapshot of the day when they returned to the conservation center.

"We had all this sensory stuff, you felt it. If you don't put it down, you'll lose it. Recall what you saw, heard and felt and let it flow out," he advised.

In just over five minutes, the participants composed engaging essays conveying their excitement over the simpler discoveries on their walk: the willow bark the pioneers and native people ate or brewed when they got a headache or the buffalo berries natives used to make pemmican. But in between those poetic sentences were loaded words like solace, spirituality, comfort, escape and healing.

"Nature brings out the best in us," Tooley wrote in his journal entry.

Another participant wrote, "I can't think of a better place to heal."

I know Norm's vision for this spot was to educate students about nature and to return it to its natural state, but what a beautiful side effect — Norm created a place for people to heal.

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