

Mary Fisher: Artist and Activist

Ever since Mary Fisher discovered that she was HIV positive in 1991, her life has been a metaphor for social activism. Only forty-three years old at the time and a recent divorcée with two young boys, the pretty petite blonde had her world turned upside down overnight, when her ex-husband called to tell her he had been diagnosed with the dreaded virus that causes AIDS. To make a bad situation worse, Mary learned that he had spread the infection to her. Needless to say, her life would never be the same.



He's My Baby, 39" x 47", designed and quilted by Mary Fisher



Asisi "Red Ribbon" bracelet from the Abataka Collection

Silver Lining

It's been said that every cloud has a silver lining, but with two little boys to worry about, Mary was hard pressed to find the bright side. Thankfully, though, her sons were not infected, and she could focus on her own fight to stay alive. "Back then, there was a stigma attached to AIDS," Mary recalls, explaining that many people with AIDS were perceived as being morally questionable. "There still is a stigma," she admits. Small wonder, then, that those who were ill were reluctant to speak openly about the disease.

Mary, however, made the brave decision to come forward about her illness. Hers was a different face of AIDS. If it could happen to an upper-class, well-connected, Caucasian woman from the Midwest, it could happen to anyone. Just one year after being diagnosed, she was invited to speak at the Republican National Convention in Houston, Texas, where she urged the Republican Party to approach the AIDS crisis with compassion. Nearly twenty years later, the silver lining on the cloud is quite evident: Mary, who had every right to be angry and bitter, turned a curse into a blessing and went on to create the Family AIDS Network (a support group for families affected by AIDS) and the Mary Fisher CARE (Clinical AIDS Research and Education) Fund. In addition, she serves on the leadership council of the Global Coalition on Women and AIDS.

Using Her Talent

Through her art, which includes quilting, weaving, painting, jewelry making, beading, paper making, and photography, Mary has also found many ways to make a difference. This multi-talented woman, whose work is included in private and public collections in the United States and around the world, now focuses on creating portrait



Mary Fisher



Tears, 99" dia., designed and quilted by Mary Fisher

quilts of African children orphaned by AIDS, to call attention to their plight, and teaching HIV-infected women from Zambia the art of jewelry making, so that they can support themselves.

Mary's latest venture, designing fabric for Troy Corporation, a Chicago-based fabric manufacturer and distributor, has pointed her in yet another direction. After Dorothy Troy, a savvy businesswoman with an eye for talent, saw an exhibit of Mary's quilts at 2010 International Quilt Market in Houston, she approached her about designing her own fabric collections. "It's exciting to see my painted designs on fabric," Mary notes. With two collections already out and two more in development, there's no doubt that she is extremely excited about her work. When creating quilts, Mary is accustomed to painting on purchased material. "Now I get to transfer my watercolors onto my own fabrics," she says. She is also grateful to Troy Corporation, which is donating 20 cents per yard from her Pathways collection to the Mary Fisher CARE Fund.

Making Progress

During the two decades that Mary has been living with AIDS, there has been progress on the medical front. While there is still no cure, a so-called drug cocktail has kept Mary and



Deep Ocean Blue bracelet, consisting of hand-blown glass beads, designed by Mary Fisher

others who are fighting the disease alive far longer than anyone could have imagined. Treatment is expensive, however, and the road is a rocky one. Even as improved medications are keeping people alive, over 43,000 new cases are diagnosed each year in the U.S. and 2.8 million in sub-Saharan Africa. Education is paramount, according to Mary, and it is clear that there is much work still to be done.

For her part, Mary, who currently lives in Sedona, Arizona, continues to be involved whenever and wherever she can. To date, more than 400,000 people have benefited from projects that Mary has funded, including organizations such as Abataka, an association of women artisans in Zambia who make and sell jewelry to provide for themselves and their families.

To learn more about Mary Fisher and her work or to purchase her fabrics, books, and artwork (as well as pieces from the Abataka jewelry collection), visit www.maryfisher.com. For a quilt project that Mary designed using her Every Living Thing fabric collection by Troy Riverwoods, turn to page 10 of this issue. ❖



Mary's paintings adorn her studio in Sedona, Arizona