

# Anita Creamer: Art to thank the doctors who helped

**By Anita Creamer -- Bee Columnist**

Published 12:01 am PDT Friday, July 28, 2006  
Story appeared in Scene section

It was hard at first to see the artistic possibilities of the situation.

The Downes family was visiting their cabin in Pollock Pines in December 2003 when Scott Downes, now 45, an accountant and father of three girls, was hit with terrible headaches.

One minute, he was bending over, cleaning out the spa. The next, he had a headache and double vision. The headache lasted for several days, even after the family returned home to Sacramento.

The initial diagnosis -- a non-cancerous brain tumor -- was bad enough.

"It was very upsetting," says Eileen Downes, 43, who's been married to Scott for 26 years. "It was very, very scary. Only after the surgery did we find out that it was brain cancer."

Chondrosarcoma, to be precise -- a rare form of bone cancer. In Scott's case, the tumor originated at the base of his skull. By the time of his two surgeries, it had grown too large to be completely removed.

You shouldn't have to stare mortality in the face when you're in your 40s. Your daughters should be able to count on you being there when they graduate from high school and college. Your wife should know that one day you'll retire together.

Neurosurgery and two months of intense radiation treatments gave Scott Downes much of his life back, though he still hasn't returned to work. His tumor is still there, but it's not growing.

"He's stable," says Eileen Downes. "And that's a great place to be."

She's a collage artist whose works have been shown in galleries and museums across the country and in New Zealand, and she's thankful beyond words for her husband's health.

And for the doctors who've made his life possible.

"Neurosurgeons have incredible knowledge and skill," she says. "They're doing this surgery that can radically affect the quality of life afterward, and they're making those decisions right there at the operating table during these 25-hour surgeries."

"They have a calling."

Hence, "Beauty and the Brain," an ongoing series of collages she's making to honor a select group of American neurosurgeons for their work -- starting, of course, with her husband's neurosurgeon, Dr. Cully Cobb III.

If the doctors' calling is brain surgery, hers is art -- these big, bright canvases painted, so to speak, with bits of torn paper she uses as her palette.

In the "Beauty and the Brain" canvases, she mixes collages of flowers with pen-and-ink illustrations of the brain. Meanwhile, she researches the recipient doctors online, taking nominations from participants on brain cancer support sites.

"People send lovely, lovely, heart-warming stories about how the doctors have helped the family and spouse," Downes says. "Very personal stories."

And then she chooses.

"This is a gift from me to the doctors," she says. "It's an acknowledgment of their skill, expertise and compassion for their patients. And it's an incredible blessing for me to give of myself like this."

She's decided to produce two canvases in the series each year, for as long as she can.

The second recipient was Dr. Ossama Al-Mefty of the University of Arkansas Medical Center.

"I wrote him a letter and explained what I was doing, and I said, 'Please accept this as a gift,' " Downes says. "The doctors are flabbergasted. Dr. Al-Mefty sent a lovely note in return."

We'd like to think medicine can cure everything, but it can't. Even so, Downes says her husband is doing well these days.

"That's all I can tell you," she says. "But I'm thankful for that."

So now she's working on another piece, destined for a neurosurgeon at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York. It hangs on the wall of her studio, a background of blue waiting for its intricate collage overlay of three vivid sunflowers.

There's art in healing, after all.

### **About the writer:**

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