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Eastern Illinois University

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Article: “Breast Cancer Survivor’s ‘Write to Heal’ Support Group Helps Patients Cope”

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## Breast Cancer Survivor's 'Write to Heal' Support Group Helps Patients Cope

When Nia Klein was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004, she didn't talk much about the mix of negative emotions that swept over her. Instead, she picked up a pen, and the simple act of writing changed her outlook, her career path, and the lives of many of her fellow breast cancer patients.

"I really did not have a very good attitude back then," Klein said. "I was kind of like, 'Why me?' My kids had just left the house and I felt like it was time to focus on me. Then I got struck down by this. It just didn't seem fair.

"I had a lot of feelings of anger and bitterness," she said. "That's not something you want to tell people or people want to hear. Writing really helped me get through that."

Klein attended a therapeutic writing workshop for breast cancer survivors at Mills Breast Cancer Institute, "and everything just kind of snowballed from there," she said.

Armed with the first-hand knowledge of the importance writing can play in patients' lives, she completed more than 40 hours of training to prepare her for leading a writing group at Mills. Then she went a step further by enrolling in graduate-level English classes at Eastern Illinois University.

"The whole reason I came down to Eastern for graduate school is this therapeutic writing generated an interest in global writing for me," the Urbana resident said, adding that she wanted to learn more about what makes writing so powerful and how it could be used in other ways.

Nia Klein



While a student at EIU, Klein found great support from faculty, especially Terri Frederick, as she made plans to conduct a therapeutic writing internship at Mills in the summer of 2009.

"The whole process for me was enhanced and augmented by the English department at Eastern," Klein said. "They've been so supportive."

Despite her "nontraditional approach" to composition, the faculty was "wonderfully welcoming," Klein said, "allowing me to go off in my own little tangent." Faculty member Tim Taylor was instrumental in helping her incorporate her therapeutic approach to writing into a pedagogically sound master's thesis, she said.

Participants' reactions to her support group, called [Write to Heal](#), were overwhelmingly positive. The patients and staff at Mills agreed that the support group was worthwhile, so Klein is now leading Write to Heal groups in eight-week increments several times a year. The program is funded through

donations.

A typical meeting includes Klein sharing readings designed to trigger ideas for writing. Participants also have time to share their words if they would like to, giving others a chance to reflect on similar feelings.

Though some people feel that they aren't good enough writers to participate, Klein stresses that the process is valuable to people no matter how their writing skills are. "All you need is a pen and paper," she said.

Participants benefit not only by sharing their feelings, but also by seeing that they are not alone in their thoughts and fears.

One participant, Pat Simpson of Philo, attended a session this past summer, not long after receiving her diagnosis. She found it helpful to gather with not only current patients, but also patients who have already successfully completed treatments.

"I just find writing is a wonderful way to discover what is going on inside of you," Simpson said. "It was particularly beneficial in terms of me facing the reality I had cancer and what I had to face on the journey."

Klein is an "excellent facilitator," Simpson said, describing her as "warm and compassionate."

Klein, who graduated from EIU with her master's degree in May 2010, has high hopes for the future of the Write to Heal program.

"There's definitely more than enough breast cancer patients in this area that this could grow exponentially," Klein said, adding that she would like to see the program expand to all cancer patients in the future.

The ideal job, she said, would allow her to mix her therapeutic writing knowledge with teaching. As an EIU graduate assistant, Klein began teaching a freshman composition class at Parkland College, which she continues to do. This past summer, she taught a creative writing class for children through Parkland.

"While my passion is for breast cancer patients and survivors, I really think it's important for the general public to know that writing is a viable tool for anyone to handle what life throws at them," Klein said.

Klein finds joy in being able to give back to those who are suffering through the hardships that she once endured.

"It makes me feel like there was a reason for me to go through what I had to go through," she said. "I never want any woman to go through this and feel like she's alone, that nobody understands what she is feeling. If I can help even one woman through this trial, this journey, it's worth it."



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