

Newsday

# Lilife

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## HEAD'S UP

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The octogenarian stand-up

BEVERLY MUNTER WOWS THE COMEDY CLUB CROWD **E27**





Left to right, Raffaella Mango, 6, Faith Virgilio, 5, and Alice Moeller, 6, paint at a session for the Healing Headbands Project in Sea Cliff.



**ON THE COVER** Esmeralda, 11, wears one of the Healing Headbands Project's creations at the Cohen Children's Medical Center in New Hyde Park.

BY STEPHEN LEVINE  
Special to Newsday

**T**he goals behind the nonprofit Healing Headbands Project — laugh, create, heal — come from the hearts of two friends from Sea Cliff who think everyone can have a hand in making someone else happy.

"We want to help those who need laughter," said Barbara Grapstein, who founded the group about 18 months ago with Joanie Accolla. "We're not comedians, we don't make people laugh. We help people laugh."

The nonprofit creates colorful head coverings for those battling cancer and other serious illnesses, and pairs the fashion with special laughter exercises conducted by Grapstein, a certified laughter yoga instructor and a certified laughter leader. The headbands are made using a UV-protected fabric that is ultrasoft and designed to feel good against bare skin, especially when it is newly exposed as a result of hair loss, which is common during chemotherapy treatments.

The idea for the Healing Headbands Project struck Grapstein in 2014 during a visit to see her daughter in Guatemala City. Grapstein saw local residents selling colorful headbands on the street, and the image stuck with her when she returned to Long Island. As a laughter leader certified by the World Laughter Tour, Grapstein sought to incorporate the therapeutic benefits of laughter into the healing process by integrating it with art. She asked her artist friend Accolla to help, and together they designed a process that allows participants' creativity and laughter to go hand in hand.

Adults and children help create the headbands. The

# The head badge of COURAGE

Joanie Accolla helps Esmeralda put on a new headband at Cohen Children's Medical Center. The girl's reaction: "In my head, it was just like 'wow.'"



The **Healing Headbands Project** brings colorful, creative and wearable joy to people fighting cancer and other ills

Esmeralda, Barbara Grapstein and Joanie Accolla get a selfie of their completed headbands at a session at Cohen Children's Medical Center.



## Help out

To donate to the Healing Headbands Project or learn more about the nonprofit, visit [healingheadbands.com](http://healingheadbands.com) or send an email to [info@healingheadbands.com](mailto:info@healingheadbands.com)

creative process begins with a laughter workshop led by Grapstein, Accolla and volunteer Jaime Cliford, who also lives in Sea Cliff. The workshops are promoted on social media and through word-of-mouth. At the children's version of the workshop, dubbed Kids for Kids and

usually held at local businesses or art studios, children are encouraged to think creatively and use their imaginations. Accolla begins the session with a pep talk.

"This is an amazing experience because you get to help a child in a hospital who's not feeling well," she told a group of four young participants before the start of a recent workshop in Sea Cliff.

Grapstein then launched into the imagination improv session, having the children imagine they were going on a trip to Hawaii. Laughter spread around the room as each child took turns spinning the "Spin and

Grin Wheel," a fun roulette that allows children to pretend to perform various activities that include riding a roller coaster, milking a cow and flying a kite.

"My cheeks hurt from smiling so much," said Lauren Pedro, 12, of Sea Cliff.

Before it was time to begin work on the headbands, Grapstein encouraged the young participants to translate all of their emotions from the exercise into a "beautiful picture of our emotions."

The children and some of their parents then painted their pictures on pre-sized poster boards.

"It makes me feel good that it

makes them [the children in the hospital] feel special," Lauren said while painting. "It sort of makes me feel proud of myself."

The artwork is collected and sent to a printer in Manhattan and processed in full color on the soft, UV-protected fabric. The headbands are then sewn together and delivered to children and families.

## COLORFUL INSPIRATION

Grapstein and Accolla have taken their workshop and headbands to several medical facilities, including Stony Brook Children's Hospital, St. Jude Children's Research Hospital

and Cohen Children's Medical Center in New Hyde Park, where 11-year-old Esmeralda is a patient.

Esmeralda picked out a tie-dye headband and then participated in Grapstein's laughter workshop, where she says she had fun pretending to ride a roller coaster and make a milkshake.

"In my head, it was just like 'wow,'" Esmeralda said about receiving the headband.

Accolla and Grapstein have held two workshops at Cohen's in the past year and are working on duplicating the program.

See COVER STORY on E6

# Banding for a cause



COVER STORY from E4

"I think what's great about it is it brings so, so much light and laughter and fun to children in hospitals," said Amanda Filippazzo, Child Life director at Cohen Children's Medical Center. "Laughter is the best medicine, and the moments of joy and laughter are few and far between."

Grapstein and Accolla have expanded the nonprofit beyond medical settings. The Healing Headbands Project has conducted one-on-one workshops with families and has an outreach program scheduled for Feb. 2 at Gilda's Club NYC, where cancer patients and their families can go for support and resources.

"Our program fits into every model," Accolla said. "Everyone's healing from something."

Grapstein believes laughter aids in healing by lowering blood pressure and putting people in a good state of mind to design the headbands. She has been a certified laughter leader since 2008 and has traveled across Europe learning different laughing exercises. The workshops Grapstein and Accolla conduct are based on the science of laughter that was learned from a training seminar with psychologist Steve Wilson, who westernized the concept of laughter clubs that existed in India. The group, based in Columbus, Ohio, said on its website that it has trained more than 6,000 certified laughter leaders.

"Our mission is to help people with illness to feel better, through the laughter," Grapstein said. "No two headbands are the same. They're like snowflakes."

The nonprofit is also planning to team up with Friends of Karen, a Port Jefferson-based group that gives financial support to the families of terminally ill children. Grapstein and Accolla are working on honoring requests to bring the Healing Headbands Project into more schools, organizations and hospitals, as well as seeking more funding as the project evolves.

"We're dreaming big here," Accolla said. "Happiness is a state of mind; headbands are a reminder that you can wear your happiness. There's no miracle cure, but we do whatever we can to make a child feel happy in the moment."



Kathy Virgilio shares the fun at a headband-making session at the Creative Arts Studio in Sea Cliff.



Joanie Accolla helps Esmeralda, 11, with a headband.

Top, a sheet of uncut headbands.