



# *Synapses*

Experience and Connection in the  
Neuro-Oncology Branch



The NCI Center for Cancer Research's Neuro-Oncology  
Branch (NOB) proudly presents



*Synapses*  
Experience and Connection in the  
Neuro-Oncology Branch

Welcome to the NOB's inaugural art exhibition for Brain Tumor Awareness Month!

Members of the NOB were invited to submit artworks that speak to their experience working in the field through a variety of lenses and perspectives. This exhibit largely focused on themes of community and connection within the neuro-oncology field—experiences that can be both uniquely individual or shared by a larger network. Works by seven artists are displayed in the following pages, and range in medium from poetry to painting and sculpture to confocal microscopy. Accompanying each artwork is a short description from the artist about their piece. We hope these works provide a glimpse into the creativity, diversity, and community that make up the NOB—and that they inspire and help raise awareness about the importance of advancing care for patients suffering from brain and spine tumors.

Brain Tumor Awareness Month  
May 2023

Brain Cancer Awareness



Bella Anderson, Age 13

*Hope is a Flower*, 2023  
Pen and ink

Hope is a Flower

Don't give up hope  
It's a very slippery slope  
Grasp the rope  
Grasp the rope  
The rope is like a vine  
It grows stronger as you climb  
To the top you'll go  
When you reach the top, you'll have grown

Through death and life  
Hardship and strife  
You've only got one life  
Live it like your last...  
Don't give up hope

# Becoming Greater than Your Cancer

By Brittany Cordeiro

"I came here to pray,  
I came here to beg,  
I came here to ask,  
that if this is my last . . .

My last option,  
My last resort,  
My last hope,  
that the treatment will work."

The resounding words in an email,  
a phone call,  
a message of desperation,  
that makes my heart ache . . .

I ache for them,  
their family,  
their friends,  
their loved ones . . .

I close my eyes and pray,  
I beg,  
I ask,  
that if we are their last . . .

Their last option,  
Their last resort,  
Their last hope,  
that the treatment will work . . .

I reply with resounding words of empathy,  
of education,  
of expert care,  
that I know they'll receive when they visit here.

"Together, we can conquer,  
Together, we can outlast,  
Together, we can grow stronger,  
than the cancer in your brain or spine you're facing . . .

A community connected is what we are,  
A community that cares deeply,  
A community that shares wisely,  
A community where you will become greater than your cancer."

Brittany Cordeiro

*Becoming Greater than Your Cancer*, 2023  
Digital illustration

"This written piece exemplifies the despair and hope that I have experienced interacting with people with brain and spine tumors. In my career of communicating with cancer patients, I empathize deeply with them when they learn about their diagnosis, but then share with them that there are options, and they are not alone. There is a community behind them, there is someone out there facing the same battle they are facing. Together, we can hope, we can conquer, and we can connect with them, to give them exactly what they need in their journey to live longer, healthier, and happier."



## Zuena Karim

*Heart of Hope: A Cat's Tale*, 2023  
Air dry clay, glaze

“This air-dry clay sculpture honors the unwavering hope that persists in the face of adversity. Atop the sculpture rests a cat figure, embodying the strength and resilience of each patient, caregiver, and those working in neuro-oncology. Its paws clasp a heart, a symbol of love and compassion while wearing a gray hat with a brain as an ode to Brain Tumor Awareness Month.

The lily pad upon which the cat sits represents the stillness and calmness of water that surrounds it, signifying that hope and peace can be found in challenging times. As you gaze upon this sculpture, let it be a reminder that hope, love, and peace are present. Let it inspire you to stand strong.”



## Maeve Pascoe

*Connections*, 2022

Confocal microscopy, digital illustration

Originally published in *Stethos*, the Medical Humanities Journal of the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine – Issue No 12, 2022

“This picture is not one, but two images; the background is a photo, the foreground is an illustration. The background is a confocal microscopy image of the corpus callosum, stained for its many cellular components, created as part of research to understand how those components and their interactions can bring about disease states. However, the corpus callosum itself is beautiful in its simplicity; it is what allows for connections across brain hemispheres, and what inspired the foreground of this picture. The illustration in the foreground is of two people, connected to each other, standing on a precipice above the sea, witnessing the beauty of the expansive universe. The microcosm of the brain and the macrocosm of the universe are not all that different, and in the end, it is our connections, between our cells and between ourselves, that give our experience of the world meaning.”



Masashi Watanabe, Ph.D.

*Hope*, 2023  
Digital illustration

“I want to show support and hope  
for our neuro-oncology community,  
including patients with brain cancer and  
their families.”



## Raleigh McElvery

*Networks*, 2023  
Watercolor and acrylic paint

“To me, nothing represents connection more than the brain’s complex networks. This illustration of an MRI scan contains various symbols of the NCI Neuro-Oncology Branch’s connections and community: two pairs of hands clasping one another (one pair in each hemisphere), hands cradling a heart, a mouse to represent our preclinical research, an antibody to represent our immunology work, a stethoscope to represent our compassionate clinical care, and a lightbulb to represent the innovation and ingenuity that transpires at the NCI every day.”





## Matthew Watowich

*In the Garden*, 2022  
Cyanotype

“Made with found flowers and organic matter, this cyanotype was inspired by the vibrancy, diversity, and resilience of the community within the field of neuro-oncology. Most central to the piece was this idea that, much like a garden, individual components have beauty on their own but can come together to create something even larger and more impactful.”

## About the Artists

**Bella Anderson** is the 13-year-old daughter of Brita Anderson, a laboratory technician in the lab of Dr. Mark Gilbert. Brita Anderson joined the NOB in February 2023 under NCI-CONNECT and works to process and manage patient samples for ongoing clinical trials.

**Brittany Cordeiro** serves as the Program Manager for NCI-CONNECT and joined the branch in January 2018. She manages program operations, plans workshops and meetings, oversees and coordinates projects, and aids leadership to achieve project success. She also facilitates partnerships with non-profit organizations and provides referral information and education materials to providers, advocates and patients.

**Zuena Karim** is a postbaccalaureate CRTA research fellow, who joined the NOB in October 2022. She works under Dr. Macy Stockdill in Dr. Terri Armstrong's group studying neighborhood-level disadvantage and the social determinants of health among the primary brain tumor population.

**Maeve Pascoe** is a medical student at the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University who joined the NOB as a research fellow through the NIH Medical Research Scholars Program. She works within the lab of Dr. Terri Armstrong and joined the branch in July 2022.

**Masashi Watanabe, Ph.D.**, is an immunologist and staff scientist in Dr. Mark Gilbert's Lab. He joined the branch in April 2022 and is interested in understanding how the immune system interacts with brain tumors and their microenvironment. His research goal is to develop novel immunotherapeutic strategies to treat brain cancer.

**Raleigh McElvery** joined the NOB as the Scientific Communications Editor in June 2022. She sets the branch's communications strategy and messaging priorities; produces the NOB and NCI-CONNECT newsletters; runs the branch's Twitter and Facebook accounts; authors news stories, profiles, and feature articles; serves as a web editor for the NOB and NCI-CONNECT websites; and oversees the branch's multimedia projects.

**Matthew Watowich** is a postbaccalaureate CRTA fellow in Dr. Mark Gilbert's lab with an interest in translational and clinical research. He joined the branch in September 2021 and is responsible for analyzing immunological responses to treatments in patients participating in ongoing clinical trials.