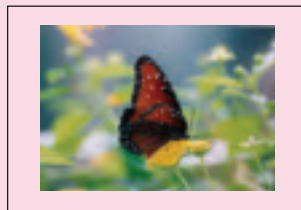


*Nancy DiMartino always knew she wanted to be a doctor, and planned on becoming an obstetrician. But when a professor challenged her to check out oncology, she discovered plans change.*



Dr. Nancy DiMartino views healing differently than most. She doesn't just focus on getting the body better, she also focuses on healing the spirit and the mind. It's something she's been doing since she was a young girl growing up in New York.

DiMartino was raised in a suburb of Albany in a tiny, rural neighborhood. She played with her siblings and friends in the countryside, coming home for lunch and heading back outdoors until dinner. It was a free and easy childhood, except for the family circumstances.

DiMartino has an older brother and a younger set of twin sisters. One of the twins has cerebral palsy and was either in braces or a wheelchair. In the 1950s, there weren't handicap accommodations, so the family couldn't go many places.

"When I look back, I realize I actually grew up pretty poor, but I felt very rich in the love of my parents," says DiMartino. "They did a fabulous job and embraced me in their love."

That love bred self-confidence and at her fourth birthday party, DiMartino was already firm in the direction of her future. When a neighbor asked DiMartino what she wanted to be when she grew up, DiMartino replied she wanted to be a doctor. The woman patted her on the head and said, "Oh, you must mean a nurse." DiMartino meant otherwise.

"I was watching a medical TV show, and Dr. Ben Casey was on the screen giving directions to the nurse. The nurse took notes, said, 'Yes, doctor' and scurried off. I realized then the doctor was the one in charge. At the age of 4, I knew I wanted to be in charge. And I've never strayed from that. I knew deep down where I was headed. It really wasn't a choice. It was a deep knowing."

DiMartino also had a feeling from a young age that her parents had suffered a terrible tragedy. "I just knew I had to be perfectly good," she recalls. "I didn't want to cause them any worries. I was a healer at a tiny age."

That inner drive to heal her parents came into focus in her teens when she discovered photos of an older brother she never knew she had. When she asked

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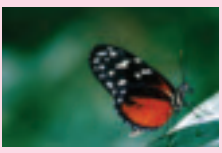
BY SHARON L. MARTIN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VINCE WALTER



*focusing  
on the  
moment*





her mother, she learned the horrific details of the drowning death of the eldest son, Andrew, who was 7 when he died.

DiMartino, who was raised Catholic, understood why her mother's devotion to her faith changed. "I think she felt like God had taken her son and then gave her twins, one with cerebral palsy," says DiMartino.

After being surrounded by the sadness a tragedy can bring, DiMartino headed to medical school with the intent of finding joy in taking care of babies. But when a professor told her she was born to be an oncologist, DiMartino thought otherwise. When he said she was afraid to try, she took the challenge. Four days into her clinic, she discovered he was right. "I loved it," she recalls. "I went into internal medicine and oncology."

The flip to oncology was an easy one for DiMartino. "I felt so comfortable in the field because I didn't struggle with the notion that we die as human beings," she says. "I go with the flow of life. I can't change the fact that people get cancer. But I can help tremendously when diagnosed how people will handle the changes handed to them without warning."

A firm believer in the positive, DiMartino feels her biggest asset is being a good listener and sharing what she knows with others. "I do my best to learn from whatever has happened to me," says DiMartino. "I've spent years learning how to become a better human being. I listen to others and learn from their life experiences."

DiMartino also believes she was transplanted from the East coast to the middle of the Bible belt for a reason.

"I believe that God is a loving, benevolent God. I believe bad things can happen in the course of living. My beliefs make living a lot easier and takes a lot of the pain out of living. I don't struggle with why things happen."

But she recognizes that many questions their life choices or wonder if mistakes made caused their cancer.

"Of course not. Energy can really be wasted on asking why," says DiMartino. "Let it go. Step past it. No human being has that answer. Instead, ask what are you going to do with it?"



That's what DiMartino asked herself when she found herself going through a divorce. Never anticipating such an event in her life, she wondered what was next for her. She began asking her patients what they did for fun. She began asking herself what she wanted to do for fun.

One morning after seeing an ad for the Butterfly House in Indianapolis, she decided to investigate. As she left, she spontaneously grabbed her camera and the instruction book.

As she entered the garden, she was overcome with a feeling of peace. As butterflies flitted around her, she began to take pictures. Upon development, she was thrilled with what she had captured on film. She had found her fun.

Today, DiMartino and butterflies are synonymous. Gorgeous photographs of the colorful creatures adorn her office walls, bringing a sense of calm to her waiting room.

"As my own life came into sharper view, my photos have become sharper and more evolved," says DiMartino. "I pay close attention to light, find the

right setting and then ask the universe to send me a butterfly." When the universe obliges, DiMartino waits for the sense to "shoot now" and snaps the shutter, capturing a moment in time. Devoted to film, she finds the hobby brings her balance and an appreciative audience.

She's had two solo art shows, one in 2005 and another in 2007. "There was such a flutter of excitement to see an aspect of nature in detail," says DiMartino. "It was so rewarding."

It was also rewarding to turn 50 and begin taking piano lessons. She practices every day, even if only for 15 minutes. "I've always wanted to play, and life's too short not to play music."



That life lesson hit home two years ago when her father was diagnosed with esophageal cancer that had spread to his liver.

Knowing that time was precious, DiMartino thought about what she needed from her dad. She knew that she needed to be held like when she was a baby. Within two weeks, she went home to find her dad in a wheelchair.

"I crawled to him and wrapped my arms around him and he wrapped me in his embrace. There was a deep sigh from him. With tears in his eyes, he thanked me. And I said, 'No, thank you. That's exactly what I needed.'"

Although she always knew he loved her, DiMartino found that feeling of being complete with her father. She helped her siblings and her mother find the same closure.

"My parents had been separated for 30 years," explains DiMartino. "Eleven days before he died, my mom put on her makeup, got dressed, walked in with her



walker and said, ‘Andrew, why are we fighting? I’m over it.’ And they made up. When my siblings told me mom and dad were together, I remember calling dad and asking, ‘What are you and mom doing?’ He responded, ‘Smooching.’ For 11 days, my mom and dad, ages 90 and 85, were smooching. That’s the miracle of healing. We celebrated life for those three months. It rounded out his journey and ours.”

Throughout the experience, DiMartino became acutely aware of the issues children with dying parents face. And for DiMartino, it was another part of her journey.

“The past prepares you for whatever comes next,” says DiMartino. “It’s all about the journey.

“People say to me, ‘You understand.’ There’s a common thread,” she continues. “It may be a different cancer with a different treatment, but if we can work within that system of chaos, we can bring hope back into the picture.”



Bringing hope has been DiMartino’s vision since her arrival in the Lafayette community in 1996. After being the chief of hematology-oncology section at the VA Medical Center, she felt a need to leave meet-

ings behind and get back to taking care of patients. When she received a call from Doug Eberle, then CEO of St. Elizabeth Medical Center, she knew she had found the perfect place to provide cancer care that incorporates the whole person, helping her patients to achieve balance of body, mind, emotion and spirit. Embraced by the community, DiMartino’s practice, Lafayette Cancer Care, has found its niche and its place in Lafayette, recently joining Unity Healthcare in July.

“I take it one patient and one family at a time. I fall in love with my patients when I meet them,” says DiMartino. “When it’s time to let them go, I let them go and I look over my

shoulder to see who I can fall in love with next.”

That doesn’t mean she doesn’t feel the need to regroup every now and then. To avoid getting worn down, she heads off on meditation retreats. “It allows me to regenerate,” explains DiMartino. “The stillness of that is very renewing. I can hear my own inner voice. You can’t do that if you’re always putting the pedal to the metal.”

DiMartino chooses not to dwell on guilt or the prospect of dying. She lets it go and focuses on what is important. “We women forget to take care of ourselves. Recognize that it’s not possible to do everything,” she

says. “Focus on what is most important and do those things first. Be satisfied with what you can accomplish.”

And that’s exactly what DiMartino does. With her partner, Steve Borghi, they find a respite in their home filled with music and art. They retreat to their back yard filled with a pond, perennials and the nature that surrounds them.

“It’s such a privilege to do this work,” says DiMartino. “I see miracles all the time. If the mind, the spirit and the emotions are open, the body will do better. If you leave the door open to get well, they will believe.”



*Photography is one of Nancy DiMartino’s favorite pastimes. Her artwork features the delicate beauty of butterflies.*