

An Open Door

SCULPTOR JOYCE MCDONALD TESTIFIES ABOUT THE HEALING POWER OF GOD, ART, AND SPEAKING OUT ABOUT HIV/AIDS *by Chael Needle*

“I don’t know if people are hearing the word or understanding what’s going on,” Joyce McDonald noted about the scope of AIDS. “You know how devastating the World Trade Center is? And how they have a fixed number of how many people perished? But AIDS—it’s a World Trade Center that’s been going on since it started. Our numbers haven’t stopped. Matter of fact, they’ve moved up. People just coming together and not being ashamed to

fight this [is what needs to happen]. Hearts need to be prepared so ears are more open.”

Through her art and her ministry, Joyce McDonald invites people to listen not only to her story but to the many stories of HIV/AIDS. Asked to describe what kind of work she does, she offered, “My spirit asked me ‘What kind of artist are you?’ I came to ‘testimonial artist’ because I’m testifying about my life through my art.” During the interview, she told me the stories behind her pieces: growing up in a loving family, experiencing the hurt of racism, struggling with addiction and abusive relationships, finding God again, coping with diagnoses, and receiving the constant support of her daughters and mother (of which she makes special mention, stopping me at the door to ask me to turn the tape recorder back on). Into the neck of one bust are embedded the surgical staples from a recent thyroid oper-

ation. This close relationship between healing and art is deeply influenced by her spirituality—all three together help her meet the challenges of living with AIDS. She calls her show “From the Shooting Gallery to the Art Gallery,” as if to emphasize not only her own personal journey from pain to a space of healing but her belief that others can make the transition as well.

The most recent leg of her journey started when she returned to her place of worship, the Church of the Open Door, after twenty-five years of heroin addiction and her pastor suggested she get tested for HIV. Though troubled by fear, she went and found out she was positive. Her pastor supported her, in part by asking her to show her art at the church. After a service, the pastor introduced her to the congregation and she told about her artwork. But she found there wasn’t any way she could talk about her art without speaking about God. “Once that happened, I felt it was time—right in my spirit,” she said. “I had not planned to tell that group of people anything. I just turned around and told the congregation I was HIV-positive. My pastor started crying. The congregation started crying. They started praising God for my life. They started coming up to me, hugging and kissing me—I thought they were going to give me something! They gave me so much love.”

As a co-coordinator of an AIDS ministry at her church, she works with a group of women to “give compassionate love.” Together they go out into the church community and provide spiritual support, educate—whatever a person may need. McDonald explained: “We go and visit our sisters and brothers. We invite people to come to our church because it is a safe haven for those with HIV or AIDS. You get love. I was just at a conference and a lot of people talked about how they couldn’t come out [as HIV-positive] in their church. It’s good to have some place to go where it doesn’t matter what you’re diag-



nosed with or what you've done and know that God loves you." She also does outreach on her own but wants to bring her art to classes, hospices, and hospitals on a more regular basis. Her art has been widely exhibited and widely embraced. She is an archive member of Visual AIDS and one of her sculptures has graced the cover of *Body Positive*.

Though her art stands on its own, her willingness to share the stories behind the art adds a rich dimension—a testament to living.

A&U: Is art important in the fight against AIDS?

Joyce McDonald: Art is definitely important. First of all, secrets kill. To be able to move your emotions through art is a release. I believe that a person is released from the inside. Like I might've gotten a strong diagnosis, and I was like "Lord, what is this?" And I go to my art and the feelings come out. So it's been helping me not to trap certain things within me. I did a class at Woodhull Hospital, on the AIDS ward, and it was amazing. My sisters and brothers—I can't even say "patients"—who came to the art class, some had never done art, but we did little pictures. Everybody had a picture of peace, or pictures of where they wanted to be. They were able to push their condition or situation and get something more positive out.

A lot of your sculptures of people—no matter what their expression—have their eyes closed. Any special significance for you?

Closed eyes for me is the spirit connection. Some of the earlier works, it's a painful close to the eyes. Some of them have a pleasurable close. Some have a watchful close.

This is how *Compassion* was developed. The first World AIDS Day [that I celebrated] I was so compelled and open. We went uptown to this church in Harlem. I didn't

know there were so many [concerned] people—just being out here you see the negative part of AIDS. And everybody, the way they were praising God, and praying for people diagnosed with AIDS—it touched me so hard that with the next piece of clay, I was like Liberace—sweating, and I think spit was coming out of my mouth! I just couldn't stop. I found out her name was Compassion. It meant I could take on either spirit. I could get lost in being diagnosed with AIDS [the figure lying down] and take on that spirit—a person who's just given up: "I'm just going to dwindle. I'm going down to forty pounds because they say if you have HIV you're going to get AIDS." I disputed all of that because I believe everybody's experience is their own. I decided I was going to be her [the figure sitting up]. I became an AIDS ministry worker. So I try to stay in



Left: *Woman of the New Millennium*, 2000, terra cotta and paper towels
Top: *Compassion*, 1999, terra cotta, paper towels, and fabric paint
Bottom: *Being Delivered*, 2000, terra cotta and fabric





that spirit, but I'm still watchful. Her eyes—each year I can read them better. Her eyes still have a concern and a sadness like "What's going to happen?" but also "I'm going to keep looking up." When my sculptures look up, they're looking up to God. Just trusting in him.

What about the blue fabric you incorporate?

The sheer blue fabric is a new level of my art. During my surgery, while everything was happening, it was a sheer fabric—I was singing, I was humming, and I was smiling, and it reminded me of sheer fabric. Blue. God can see through all—he can see your heart. Our skin, our flesh, is like sheer fabric to Him.

Where do you see your art going?

I see me in Madison Square Garden. [Laughs.] No, I see me going places and taking certain works. I've been to the battered women's shelter and I brought certain sculptures that touch on [issues the women may be dealing with]. I see my art just giving hope. No matter what your condition or whatever you've been through, you can be delivered. You can be healed. I had so many secrets. It's amazing—the things I talk about in my art are things I didn't think I'd ever tell anybody. My art has delivered me from deep dark secrets.

I'd also like to have a gallery or a museum space where I could take all of my art because I'd like to go around and pick up each sculpture and do a story on it—each one tells a story. Basically, that's what I do.

What do you hope people take away from your art?

I hope to inspire and to show people that my art directly comes from God. To show them the things that God has brought me out of. To show them that no matter how wounded they are—if they've had a broken life or a broken spirit for things they may or may not have been responsible for—that they can be delivered. A lot of young women and older women that I meet who have been through the same situations as myself—my art administers to them.

I would like to spread joy and triumph through my art.

You may contact Joyce McDonald at JoyceMAC@mymailstation.com.

Chael Needle is the Managing Editor of A&U.



Top Left: *Sustained Through*
Grace, 2000, terra
 cotta, fabric, and metal-
 material
Top Right: *Queen Detox*,
 1998, terra cotta and
 tinted leather
Bottom Right: *Prevalent*
Layer of a Mother,
 2000, terra cotta and
 sheer fabric