



# **Blue Skies Ahead**

**Story by: Stephanie Koepp, O.T.  
Mayo Clinic Health System**

*About a month and a half after COVID-19 began showing up in Wisconsin, I found a lump in my breast during a self-exam. I was seen the same day at Mayo Clinic Health System in Eau Claire and had imaging performed. Shortly after, I was diagnosed with ductal carcinoma in situ and stage IV invasive ductal carcinoma, as the cancer was also found in a lymph node on the opposite side of the cancer. The first thought that went through my head when I heard the words, "I'm sorry Steph. It's cancer," was "I can't miss my children's lives."*

*As a 36-year-old wife and mother of three, going through cancer treatment during a pandemic has had its ups and downs. Before each chemo treatment I had a COVID test to ensure I was negative due to the stress chemo put on my immune system and to protect other patients and staff at the cancer center. I was lucky to have my mom go with me for my first five chemo treatments, but by my sixth and last round, the visitor policy had changed because of increasing COVID numbers, and I wasn't able to have my family or friends present when I rang the chemo bell. The chemo nurses were wonderful and celebrated that victory with me. Since chemo ended, I have gone to appointments independently with my husband on the phone or virtually to be a part of the appointments. I have also been lucky to have virtual visits with my providers.*

*Because I had a compromised immune system through my chemo treatments, my friends and family were very creative with supporting me and my family. My friends and co-workers placed encouraging signs in my yard and posted pictures on social media with "Team Steph" t-shirts and bracelets. They also set up a food train that delivered meals to my doorstep twice a week. They even came to my last day of chemo and cheered for me outside the cancer center window with signs and balloons. I have received so many gifts and well wishes in the mail and on my doorstep that I am so grateful for.*

*Thanks to my children's elementary school virtual program, I was able to keep my kids home for virtual learning during chemo to protect me from catching an illness, including COVID. Our church also went virtual, and we've been able to keep in touch with our church family through all of this also.*

*While it's been hard to be away from people during cancer treatment because of the pandemic, I'm blessed to have an amazing support system that has used creativity, technology and generosity to support and encourage me and my family. I am forever grateful.*

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**Artist Morgan Depke  
Eau Claire, WI**

Morgan Depke is a sophomore at UW-Eau Claire who began college as an art and design major. Art and healthcare have been major influences in my life, as her mother is a nurse practitioner and her brother is in the midst of medical school. She'd always had a strong interest in medicine, and when the COVID-19 pandemic began to have an influence

on the community, she realized her own calling to be a nurse and changed her major. The Healing Reflections project links her passions for art and healing.

*When reading Stephanie's story about "Cancer in a Pandemic," I felt compelled to help tell her story through making what was originally a photograph, into a mixed media piece. The photograph was composed of a moving still where Stephanie received her last chemo treatment within the cancer center. Her family and friends had to cheer her on from outside the clinic with smiles, balloons, and congratulations due to the strict no visitor policy, in light of increased community spread of COVID-19. I was not surprised to hear that there wasn't a dry eye among those witnessing this meaningful moment. Despite Stephanie not having family and friends directly with her during this occasion, she felt lucky to share this victory with her loved ones, chemo nurses, providers and all others who helped support her through this journey.*

*Symbolically, I chose to capture Stephanie, her family, and friends in a high contrast, black and white painting, as if the viewer was looking at a black and white photograph taken by a vintage camera. I hoped to depict the portrait of Stephanie as she holds triumph over this part of her journey and the realization that she can move forward proud of what she has overcome. The background of the piece is constructed of a patchwork of varying shades of blue jean fabric detailed with intricate beading. I selected jeans material as the fabric, representing the 'Blue Skies Ahead' in her cancer journey and returning to a hope for normalcy despite the added challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The beads of the piece symbolize the many prayers and well-wishes spoken for Stephanie; the star overlays represent the anchoring individuals who were always there for her through her diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. Stephanie's story had an enlightening impact on me, as despite the extensive challenges of having cancer in a pandemic, it was the amazing support system of her family, friends, church, and community that enveloped her in a warm blue fabric of strength and support to help her push forward in her healing.*

**View all the pieces in the *Healing Reflections* [online gallery](#).**