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from the Photographic Alliance of Great Britain

e-news 381 extra two

## JENNIFER WILLIS MFIAP



By Jennifer Willis from her MFIAP submission

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**"In the autumn of 2020, a friend told me that she had been diagnosed with Secondary Breast Cancer (also known as Metastatic or Stage 4 Breast Cancer). Her breast cancer had spread to other parts of her body. The disease was incurable, and treatment would be palliative. Not long after, she asked if I would photograph her for the remainder of her life. At the time, her prognosis was between nine months and two years. I agreed.**

As I spent more time with her, I learned that where we live (Northern Ireland), those diagnosed with Secondary Breast Cancer often lack the support they need. There is a lack of understanding of the disease and knowledge of its symptoms even amongst the medical profession. As with many women's health issues, too often symptoms are disregarded as hormone or pregnancy related, infection, injury or psychological. Pain killers, antibiotics, physiotherapy, or counselling are prescribed, and diagnoses and treatment are delayed.

Often breast cancer is represented in the media with pink ribbons, the very best specialist care and good survival statistics. However, this belies the reality for those who live in the knowledge that *their* breast cancer will kill them. They often feel invisible. I decided to offer my time and photographic ability to give them visibility. I suggested putting together an exhibition of portraits showing the physical and emotional pain of living with this devastating disease. My images would reveal *their* experiences, give *them* a voice, enable *them* to raise awareness of the disease, and to share *their* stories with the public, medical professionals, politicians and policy makers.

Building trusting relationships before even lifting the camera was essential to being able to represent their stories with dignity and authenticity. In the intimacy of the studio, not only did they bare their physical scars, but they also confided in me their pain, their emotions, hopes, and fears. Capturing the often-unseen realities of their lives in their faces was a need. The lighting was simple. Most of the final images were captured organically during conversation, and during periods with me just listening.

I became acutely aware of the importance to these women of being heard. I need the viewer to see the person first, then, in so far as each was comfortable, the surgical scars, mastectomies, reconstructions, pick lines and drug ports. There were many memorable days, some joyful, others were incredibly hard. Five of the women I photographed have died, one before she saw her portrait. This work, and their participation in it, has become part of their legacy project..

Whilst I will never be able to quantify the difference that these images have made, it has become a work of advocacy that has resulted in some tangible changes. I have also witnessed the impact that the project has had in the lives of the women who participated. Through their participation, they used

this platform and raised their incredibly strong voices, they were empowered to speak up, to advocate for themselves and for others. They now have invaluable support from each other and from a dedicated specialist support group.

Getting to know these women and being part of their lives has been a privilege. I am proud, humbled, and so very grateful to have been able to use my photography in this way. The impact on me as a photographer and as a person has been profound.

The images in my MFIAP portfolio are uncompromising and provocative. They are raw, powerful and could even be described as graphic. They are also as authentic, beautiful, and dignified as my sitters.

I have at this point photographed 52 women and one man and to have the quality of this growing body of work acknowledged with the MFIAP distinction really is the most wonderful news and will help to ensure that this work will indeed be a legacy.

I am so very grateful to the FIAP Directory Board for awarding my submission but most especially I must thank every one of the women who awarded me the privilege of photographing them in the way that I did. This is for you!

*Jennifer.*







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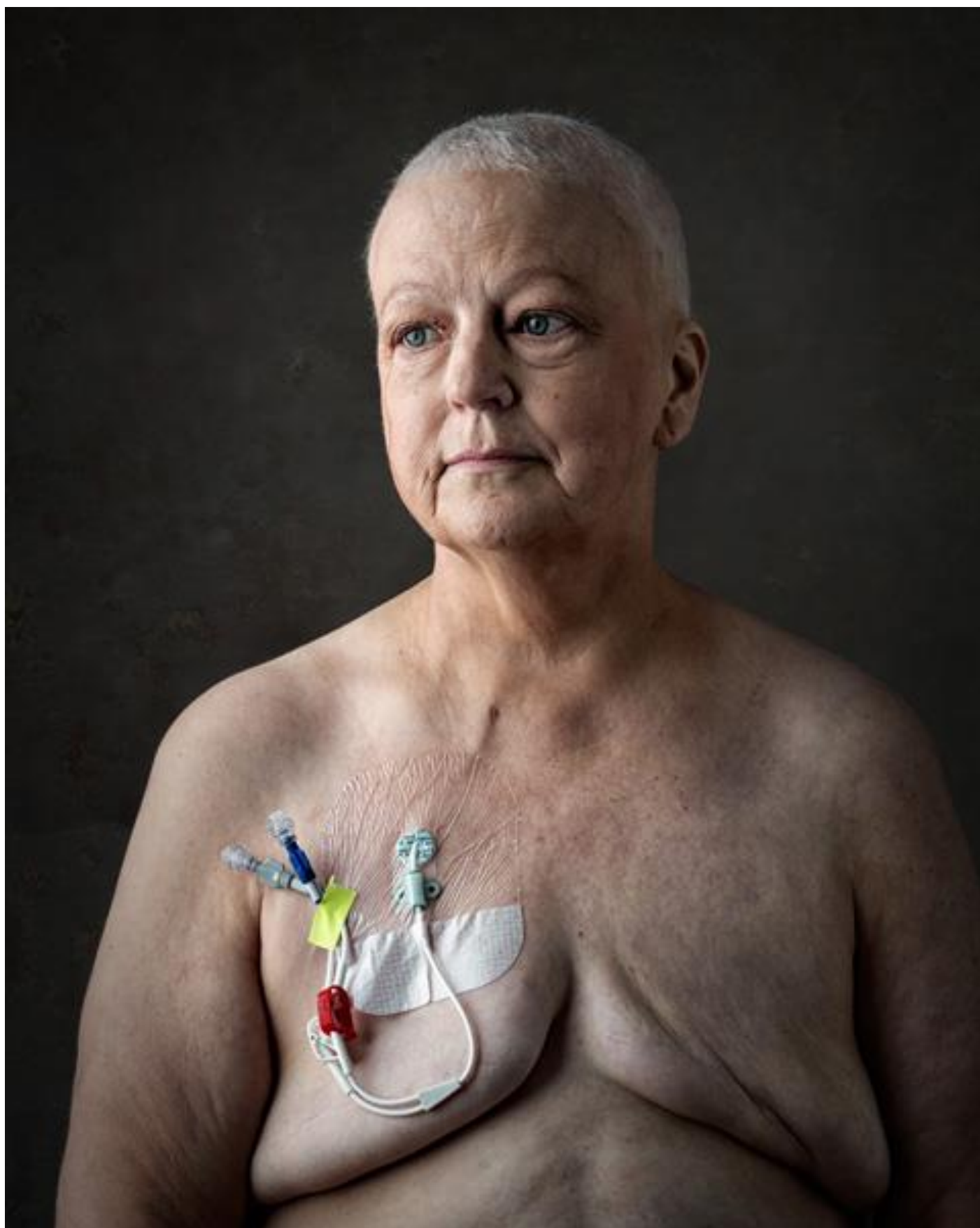


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by secondary breast cancer



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**Education** is key to everything that we do and we aim to raise awareness of secondary breast cancer through effective marketing and education programmes across the UK. We also empower our community by increasing their knowledge and understanding of research, treatments, trials and options.



**Living with a secondary breast cancer diagnosis is both mentally and physically gruelling and can be incredibly isolating. Our support programme helps our community by informing, sharing, fostering important relationships, and offering practical advice.**