AMAZING STRENGTH
Photographer captures stories of cancer patients, survivors through gallery

Wendy Andrews stands in front of her photos of Team Phoenix members. Andrews shot photos of 39 different women for her series “Amazing Strength.”

By Alex Nemec
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DELAVIELD — As you walk into Genetti Gardens in Delafield, vibrant colors meet the eye as the store’s metal works and other decorations adorn the 611 Bleeker St. shop.

However, in between those colorful decorations are black and white pictures of women — women who personify the word strength, said artist Wendy Andrews.

Andrews debuted her gallery featuring 39 photos of 39 women titled “Amazing Strength” on Saturday to those women.

The show runs until Sunday and is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. today. There will be a gallery talk every day at 2 p.m.

Being a cancer survivor herself, Andrews joined a group called Team Phoenix, which was co-founded by her doctor, Judy Tjoé.

Team Phoenix is a program where women are empowered to become proactive in their own health care and survivorship, move beyond the label of cancer survivor and redefine themselves as athletes through the introduction to the joys of exercise and living well, their pamphlet states.

Members of the team train for 14 weeks and end the program by competing in a triathlon.

“Research studies show that women who exercise regularly and stay in shape lessen the chance for recurrence,” Andrews said. “I knew I could finish the event was excited to do it and get back in shape and feel like myself again.”

Andrews, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2016 and classified as NED, which stands for no evidence of disease in 2017, completed the triathlon that same year.

“When I saw these women crossing the finish line in 2017 I knew I needed to photograph these women and I need for them to see how beautiful they are and for them to see their strength,” Andrews said. “A lot of women are so critical of themselves that they don’t feel beautiful.”

Capturing stories

Andrews said it was important to her that there was a record of some of the people she knew with Team Phoenix.

“When someone dies, what do you go for? You go for their likeness, you want to see a picture of them happy or strong or some good quality, not just a Facebook selfie or snapshot,” she said.

Prior to any photoshoot, Andrews said she has a consult with the person to understand who they are and to figure out the direction she wants the photos to go.

On Monday, as she went from one canvas photo to another, Andrews explained the women’s entire history from their diagnosis to prior medical issues to how many kids they have and hardships they’ve faced.

“It’s crystal clear just how much she cares about these strong women. “After I hung the gallery I spent a few minutes in here by myself and I was overwhelmed and proud,” Andrews said. “I was excited that I was finished. I was excited that these women could see these images.”

During her consultations with the women, Andrews tried to pick out what made each of the women strong.

“I’ll take them to a spot that I feel represents the story I need to say based on what I need to know about the person,” Andrews said. “Some of the women who were petrified of swimming, I dragged their butt right down to a lake because they conquered their fear of water by doing that triathlon.

“When I see strength, these women crossing the finish line never having swam before training, some of them sobbing in tears and some jumping with joy to me that’s beautiful. It doesn’t take Photoshop or costumes or accessories, that’s who they are.”

There is one more informational meetings left for Team Phoenix this year, tonight at 6:30 p.m. at Aurora Conference Center, 2920 W Dakota St.

For more information on Team Phoenix call 414-219-4887 or email team-Phoenix@aurora.org.