



Warrior Scar Jewelry Program at the World Burn Congress

A Post Traumatic Growth Experience

by Holly Gage

Christopher and I arrived at the finely appointed and massive Gaylord Conference Center in National Harbor, Maryland, where we were to spend 4-days at the World Burn Congress and teach our Warrior Scar Jewelry program. Since this was our first time meeting 700 burn survivors at this event, we were excited, nervous, and anticipated the

normal teaching jitters we always get. I could only sum it up as a profound set of experiences that took me some time to process. There were golden nuggets of growth for the participants and also for both of us as well.

Chris started by telling us about himself and his journey with Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) after his burn accident, consuming 40% of his body. Interestingly enough, there can be big and small triumphs after a traumatic injury, which is exactly what Chris personally experienced. Once we found out it was teachable, we became PTG coaches. We



implemented many of the PTG concepts, weaving them in with a gentle approach of mindfulness and acceptance into the Warrior Scar Jewelry Program.

During the program, we help folks express themselves from a deeper place inside through their art and creativity, opening them up to new experiences as they take a step toward ideas of healing and turning struggle into strength. We facilitate community building and support the value of what others can give, suggesting it's OK, and are encouraged to seek support from them. We look for the positives

and newfound strengths by reflecting on their achievements. We culminate in group discussion, encouraging participants to tell their stories -- some for the first time.

When I introduced myself, I admitted to them how intimidated I was by their strong constitution. I felt I was in a room full of mighty warriors, hence the name of the program Warrior Scar Jewelry. We talked about the strength

it takes to be a burn survivor. I reminded them of what they overcame. To put that in perspective for someone who has never been through a severe burn, often they have a grueling recovery regimen. For those put in an induced coma for possibly weeks or months, waking can be a bewildering experience not knowing what happened or where they are. Afterward, they need to stretching through the pain, often bleeding as they open healing wounds, but are urged to continue by the doctors and nursing staff. Regular debridement of the scars, which is the removal of dead skin so new skin can grow. Learning how to walk or use their arms and hands again or learning to operate without them due to burns so bad they needed amputation. It takes a long time to reacquaint oneself with their



This is one of my favorite pieces of jewelry I own. Why? This is my scars in the texture. During WBC, we did a scar jewelry workshop. As I entered, I wanted a different sight for the scar to be older because texture would have been much more intense. However, I was inclined to do the arm instead. Here is the result! Now, let me explain 3 powerful things about this piece more than Just my scars in it:

1. Look at the right side of the cross. Notice the scars create deep straight lines by the tip of the arm? I wasn't burned on that side but it was a prime destination for the self harm scars I inflicted. It's almost as if God is representing this in the way its shown here.
2. Do you notice the left side is shorter than the right? That is how my body naturally is from thos injury so I thought that worked out well.
3. Do you see the right toward the center? I wasn't burned on my right side there BUT after a surgery in 2020, I have scaring there. I felt as I held this piece, God highlighted it as of this was healing my brokenness I felt due to that situation.

Now, there is obviously thousands of stories this cross shares. There is hundreds of memories. Countless surgeries and setbacks. I was looking this entire year (since my previous plan blew up in my face) for a way to put a cap on 20 years as a survivor. This is a perfect way to do so! I hope to work with thos couple again (since they live close to Lebanon) and do other sites of my scars. But until then, I am so proud of this piece.

These pictures and excerpts were shared by Kelsay Elizabeth Parrot in her own words on social media.

new body. Some are dealing with lost family members who perished in the incident or the loss of a relationship due to guilt, blame, poor coping skills, or maybe a relationship that is just too painful as it is a reminder of what life was once like and what was lost. The long path to rebuilding a life takes a dramatic turn, requiring many to reinvent themselves and gain a shred of confidence in their newly fire-molded bodies. All of these facts are stories the scars tell, and we suggest instead of hating them, there might be a little room to celebrate the bravery needed to obtain them.

Burn survivors represent a cross-section of folks from all over the world from the US, UK, Nepal, Korea, Kenya, and many other corners of the world. Burn accidents happen without discrimination, so we met people who were white, black, or brown, of various religions, and of every economic level, age, or body type, and there was instant belonging - no outcasts, no one being shunned or shamed. The imperfections of us all just didn't matter, and to the contrary, we celebrated their survival stories and bravery. I kept thinking the general population could learn a thing or two about acceptance, kindness, and compassion.

They come to the World Burn Congress to find answers to their healing journey, to gather with others in a

family-like, accepting environment, and to learn new coping skills.

What they received from the Warrior Scar Jewelry Program was that and so much more. Chris and I talk about the strength and resilience those scars represent. We often get folks who say I "only" did what I had to survive, but that is so far from being accurate as this is really a choice. Some people decide this fight is too much for them -- survival is not a foregone conclusion; they MADE their recovery happen. I think this is the first time they truly realize the power of their choice, making them a true life warrior and finding new meaning and purpose in their life.

After introductions from us and discussion about the project, we used a non-toxic molding compound to take an impression of the scars. Chris volunteered to use the scars on his bicep to let me demonstrate the molding process. As often as he rolls up his sleeve, it takes Chris out of his comfort zone, as on a regular day, you might catch him tugging at his sleeve to hide the scars that peek out. Chris stands there vulnerable as the entire class has eyes on one of the parts of his body he hates. As he explains his discomfort in showing his scars, however, at



the same time, he demonstrates to the group that doing so during the program is also safe for them. In fact, during the round table discussion at the end of the program, one of the participants described to Chris how empowering that was for her. The power of his actions and the meaning behind her words couldn't be understated, as it points to the many tiny realizations that take place when you allow yourself to be vulnerable, to remember pieces of the traumatic puzzle you've tried so hard to put together while amid the fire-induced chaos.

I was honored to be asked by some participants to help them pick a good area of their scars to mold. Showing them to me opened the door to a private and intimate moment. Some talked of the significance of particular areas over others, and some took their molding compound and made their impression in private. As we started working on the scars, we asked them what message they wanted the scars to tell in the jewelry. Many inscribed words of meaning and inspiration to them on the reverse side,



such as Survivor, Warrior, Fortitude, a faith quote, and one person wrote “Me” as she continued on the journey of self-discovery. They sat there working for several hours with lots of conversation between them about their accident and the challenges they now face. They might hug each other, offer kind words, and suggest a solution to the challenge. They bonded over their commonalities, and the interactions were beautiful. This sacred, safe



zone of compassion provided the survivors with intimate friendships while they shared their very personal and traumatic experiences with each other.

We planned a big reveal of the jewelry on the following day, where we were allotted one hour for discussion time. The moment was filled with anticipation, and as first-timers working with Metal Clay, I’m not sure they truly could envision their gray, delicate greenware turning into a shiny, strong, precious, Fine Silver heirloom, even though I showed them samples of finished jewelry.



Their jewelry was placed in a gift box and handed to each recipient. Their reaction was priceless! It was a combination of seeing how beautiful their scars looked in Silver and genuine awe of their own creative and physical ability. For the next hour, we were steeped in emotion and



went around the circle one at a time, passing around their jewelry piece and talking about what the jewelry represented to them.

We facilitated a thoughtful conversation, allowing them to say anything with the knowledge that what was said at the World Burn Congress stays at the World Burn Congress. Some told their burn survival story and discussed their achievements since the accident. Some talked about what they saw in the jewelry they made. One explained seeing the mountains and a river valley, another described in visual terms how this represented her healing journey, and another took a massive step in revealing her scars for the first time. It is incredible to us that sever-hours of creating art, sharing, and talking to a sympathetic group would be so healing and dissolve the inhibitions they came with. By the time we were done, there wasn't a dry eye in the room as the box of tissues was passed from one person to another. I would say the tears represented many things -- telling an untold story, a release of joy and pain, revealing themselves, and realizing they really are a Surviving Warrior.

Holly Gage is the creator and instructor of the Warrior Scar Jewelry workshops and co-founder of the Healing Phoenix Arts Program. Holly is a world-renowned jewelry artist and has instructed students of all ages and abilities with a soulful brand of creating during in-person workshops, interactive online classes, and retreats worldwide for almost 25 years. After her husband and son were involved in an explosion and fire in 2018, she became trained to support burn survivors and their families through the Phoenix Society for Burn Survivors' SOAR program and certified in the Post Traumatic Growth program from the Boulder Crest Foundation. Together with her husband, Christopher Gage, they combine art with discussion as a healing modality for a Post Traumatic Growth experience.

Christopher Gage is the Group Discussion Facilitator of the Warrior Scar Jewelry Workshop and Co-Founder of the Healing Phoenix Arts Program. Christopher is a burn survivor whose recovery experience from his accident in 2018 is the number one event that has driven him to his current line of work with trauma. The explosion, fire, and destruction of his mobile restaurant lead him to become a lapidary artist, and has completely reshaped Christopher's life for the better, in a positive way, resulting from working through the Post Traumatic Growth (PTG) process. Christopher learned there is a teaching component to Post Traumatic Growth, and he has a need to give hope to those who have suffered trauma. Christopher is peer support trained and certified in Burn Survivor and Post Traumatic Growth. Christopher speaks about PTG and is the author of a book detailing his journey to come in 2024.

