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Art with the power to heal

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By **PATRICK BUTLER** Staff Writer

Nancy Gershman always wanted to be a playwright. But she never expected her "scripts" to be telling stories of someone's life or even capturing a family's personality in digital photo montages created with the insight of a layout designer, stage director, choreographer -- and more than the touch of the medicine woman.

One of the more memorable works to come out of her Art for Your Sake studio on the 500 block of West Barry, she said, was the product of a friend's difficulty dealing with the death of her father, who had abandoned the family, only to eventually return to help care for the ailing wife he hadn't talked to in decades.



Artist Nancy Gershman, of Art For Your Sake, poses with one of her "Dreamscapes" photo montages in her basement art studio in Lake View. - (Mia Aigotti/for Pioneer Press)

Another client who wanted a montage for a party he was throwing for the 90-year-old father he never could stand mellowed a bit after helping to plan a picture incorporating some of the more annoying things about Dear Old Dad. Like his tendency to brag endlessly about his earlier basketball prowess. And his insistence on having his steaks raw.

The result was a row of steaks hanging from the rafters of his father's old high school gym, incorporating an old picture of the B-ball star gliding cross the courts wearing Twinkies for gym shoes.

"The balance of power in that family has sort of leveled out," laughed Gershman, adding that "maybe (her client) doesn't need to see a shrink anymore."

The former advertising copywriter who drifted into her current business because she had always been playing with photos -- and doesn't think she ever sent a store-bought greeting card, preferring to make them herself -- emphasized she doesn't consider herself any kind of therapist. And she has no idea exactly how her "Healing Dreamscapes" really work.

But the third-generation artist doesn't just do heavy lifting. She estimates that most of the two or three projects she does every week are for occasions such as wedding anniversaries, retirements or class reunions.

She's even done "coming out" montages for gays breaking the news to family and friends and once portrayed a client's "crazy" mother-in-law by creating six different images of the woman at various stages in her life interacting with each other.

Gershman, who moved here from the East Coast 17 years ago, said she would eventually like to do with video what she has been doing with stills. "I tried it already, but I may have been a little ahead of the technology. A little too early."

But she is thinking of breaking new ground as more and more people choose cremation and tangible visual keepsakes become all the more important to some grieving families.

"Every family has its own personality. I'm trying to capture not just time and place, but personality," said Gershman, who can be reached at nancy@artforyoursake.com.

After the father's death, the daughter wanted to find some way to move her five brothers and sisters toward a semblance of forgiveness so they could all move on, said Gershman. Her solution was composite of 13 photos depicting various family members over the years, as well as a Buddha figure suggesting the father's possible concern for his karma. And including photos showing some of the father's long-forgotten sides which Gershman said had a profound effect on the family.

"It was a kind of a peace pipe."

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