

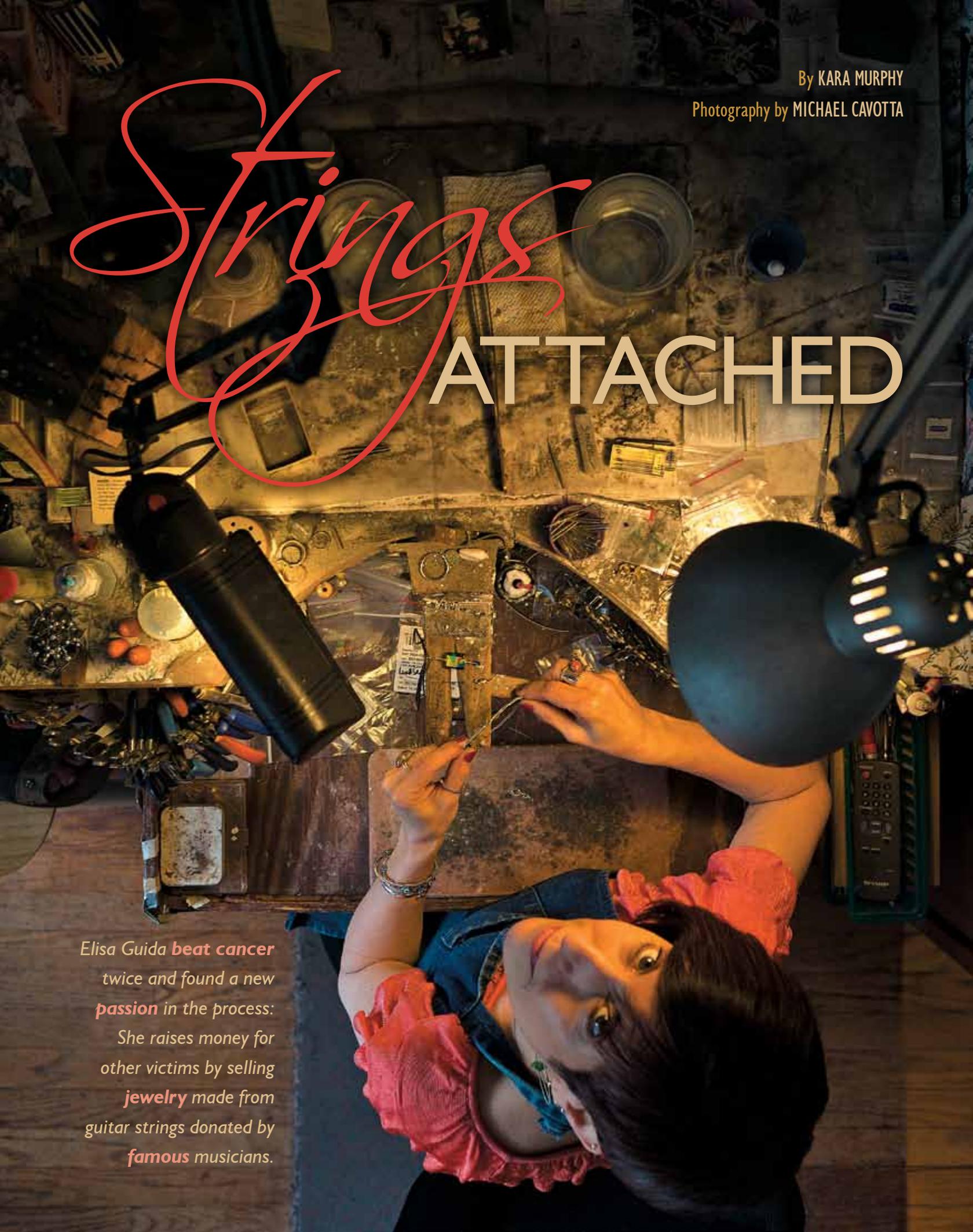
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Photography by MICHAEL CAVOTTA

Strings

ATTACHED

Elisa Guida **beat cancer** twice and found a new **passion** in the process: She raises money for other victims by selling **jewelry** made from guitar strings donated by **famous** musicians.



IN 1995, ELISA GUIDA WAS 40. She was a newlywed. She owned a successful business making high-end jewelry in Erie, Pa.

Life, in other words, was good.

Then came a visit to the doctor. A biopsy was ordered. And four words that would upend her existence: You have breast cancer.

"You don't think it's going to be you," she says.

Guida discovered the cancer early and beat it. So she went back to her life, thinking she had lived through the worst. "I appreciated life more because of it," she says.

But she was also on the lookout with self-exams and frequent checkups. In 2005, her vigilance paid off. Doctors told her the cancer had returned, but that she had again caught it early. This time she had a mastectomy.

Facing mortality twice has taught her some serious life lessons.

"I don't put things off anymore," says Guida, now 56. "I don't live with regrets. That's why I decided that I'm doing the foundation, and I'm doing it now."

The foundation is Strings for a Cure. Guida raises money by creating one-of-a-kind rings, bracelets and necklace pendants out of guitar strings previously used by musicians. Profits from the sales of her jewelry go to helping breast cancer survivors.

Guida came up with the idea three years ago. She got a great start when world-renowned blues guitarist Joe Bonamassa donated strings. Erie musicians also were generous with their strings, and soon Guida — who founded her business, La Petite Jewelers, 35 years ago — was spending more time making jewelry out of old guitar strings than sparkling diamonds.

As word of Strings for a Cure began circulating among musicians, donations came in with increasing regularity.

Bottom left: A piece in progress using singer-songwriter Todd Rundgren's strings.
This photo: Guida at work. She's wearing jewelry she designed, including earrings made from Jazz musician Larry Carlton's string and beach glass.



Where to Buy

Visit stringsforcure.com to see Elisa Guida's guitar-string jewelry. Prices start at \$30 and go up depending on the piece and the musician who donated the string. The most expensive item sold so far is a \$550 piece made with Carlos Santana's string.

Strings for a Cure donated funds for Susan to travel to Cleveland, where she undergoes treatments. She also received gift cards so that she could purchase Christmas presents for her children, ages 7 and 10. "I didn't know how I was going to give my kids Christmas," she says.

She says the support she's received from Guida has been invaluable. "People don't really know what you're going through unless they've been through it themselves," she says.

Guida says the ability to offer that support, both financially and emotionally, has been the most fulfilling part of her journey.

"I love making jewelry," she says, "but I've found that helping is a whole different feeling."

Then, in January, came the news: Jon Bon Jovi wanted to donate six guitar strings that he'd used during a show in Miami on Jan. 3, 2011.

In February, another blockbuster: The band Train, which won a 2010 Grammy for its song "Hey Soul Sister," would donate strings. Lead singer Pat Monahan is an Erie native.

Other famous musicians also donated as word spread, including Buddy Guy, Carlos Santana and George Lynch. Many musicians are motivated to donate by their own experience with the disease.

Aaron Williams is part of the Wisconsin band Aaron Williams and the Hoodoo. His father was a well-known blues artist in the Midwest who toured under the name Cadillac Joe. He died in 2009 from blood cancer.

"You see someone that close to you struggle so much, go through that pain,

you realize very quickly what's really important," Williams says. "It puts everything in perspective."

Williams donated strings from his Fender Telecaster guitar in 2010. His fans snapped them up, and Guida sold out of the pieces she had created with his strings in just days.

The money the foundation raises is used to purchase grocery, pharmacy and gas gift cards for people fighting breast cancer. It also helps those with cancer pay for wigs and purchase educational material about their disease.

Strings for a Cure has donated money to research as well, but the foundation focuses on helping people with breast cancer continue treatment.

"You want to help people keep fighting," Williams says. "And being able to do that by donating strings — which most of us guitar players just throw in the trash because you change them so often — is really cool."

One of the people the foundation has already aided is Susan, a 51-year-old single mother of two in Erie diagnosed with breast cancer in February 2010. Susan, whose doctors have told her the cancer has progressed to her lymph nodes, asked that her last name not be used because she has kept the details of her diagnosis private from many in her life.

