

Biotech-nonprofit relationship yields exhibit on ‘evolution of beauty’

BY COLLEEN WILSON

cwilson@westfairinc.com

The collaboration among a biopharmaceutical company, nonprofit research organization and a community of people who have disabilities goes back 20 years.

A product of that alliance came to fruition last week, when The Raw Beauty Project NYC photography exhibit opened to the public at Ardsley-based Acorda Therapeutics Inc. after spending the last six months at the American Contemporary Art Galleries in New York City.

In a spacious room filled with natural sunlight at Acorda is a gallery of hanging photos of women displayed in their individual element. Sailing a boat, playing sled hockey on ice, singing on the Brooklyn Bridge and lounging on a couch prominently displaying a tattoo are some of the poses of the models, most of whom have spinal cord injuries.

The project is a partnership between the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation, which helps fund research and grants for people living with paralysis, and mobileWOMEN.org, an online magazine and resource for women in wheelchairs.

Wendy Crawford, the founder and editor of mobileWOMEN, was one of six original committee members who formulated the Raw Beauty idea in 2008 when the first photo shoot took place.

“And then it just kind of sat dormant because we were all so busy in our own lives,” she said. And then the idea surfaced again. “I was able to connect with the photographers that I worked with, and New York just seemed like a perfect place.”

At 19, Crawford was an aspiring model from Canada when she was in a car that got hit by a drunken driver, leaving her a quadriplegic.

Since then, Crawford, now 50, has been a spokeswoman against drunken driving, served on and co-founded nonprofit organi-



Photos on display in the Raw Beauty Project NYC exhibit at Acorda Therapeutics. Photo by Colleen Wilson

zations and committees, and with this project become a model for women who represent what she called “an evolution of beauty.” In fact, it was through her public outreach that she met Ron Cohen, founder, president and CEO of Acorda, about 15 years ago.

“They (Acorda) asked me to come and speak to their scientific board, so the scientists know who they’re working for,” Crawford said. “I just thought that was an amazing thing, and I got to know everyone.”

Acorda has been developing therapies and pharmaceutical products for people whose lives have been affected by neurological disorders, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s disease, spinal cord injuries and other health issues since 1995.

“Your mission,” Cohen said about his organization, “is not just putting jobs on the mar-

ket,” but also finding “other ways that we as a company can be useful.”

Cohen recalled that he “walked in forcefully” to the American Paralysis Association office in 1994, now known as the Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation, to pitch the idea for what would become Acorda.

Susan Howley, executive vice president of research at the Reeve Foundation, said Cohen “barged” in on that day, but that she was excited he did. And at the exhibit opening last week, Howley said the Reeve Foundation-Acorda connection continues to be a valuable relationship.

“I think that the nonprofit-biotech triangle that we’re working on is going to be worth it,” she said.

And for the next month, the general public can see the fruits of that partnership.