

The Morning Call

MS victims find refuge in Art

Their intense canvases reveal emotions behind ongoing nerve disease.

Article by Ron Devlin
Of The Morning Call



Ed Thierer could paint something safe, like a pastoral landscape or a quaint farmhouse along a country road in New Tripoli. Instead, the 37-year-old Northampton man takes on a much more challenging artistic task — to depict the often conflicting emotions that stem from his ongoing battle with multiple sclerosis. Across a dark, swirling background, Thierer emblazons flaming yellow balls with cometlike tails. The painting exudes a sense of journey into the unknown, perhaps indicative of the artist's own encounter with the progressive nerve disease. “There,” says Thierer, a tall man with a ponytail dangling from beneath an Indy 500 baseball cap, “everything in my head is now on canvas.” Thierer's chance at self-expression comes during an innovative art class at Good Shepherd Rehabilitation Hospital in Allentown.



Dr. Brett Weber, an Allentown artist with MS, teaches the class as an antidote to the depression that accompanies the debilitating disease. MS attacks the myelin sheath, or lining, that covers nerves in the brain. The damage interrupts brain signals to the body parts, causing difficulty in walking, uncontrollable shaking of the hands and diminished eyesight. The disease is progressive, but its onslaught can be slowed with immune suppressants. There is no cure. Jerry Werner, who coordinates the art therapy program, says MS often strikes in the prime of life. Most of Weber's students are in their 30s and 40s and were forced to give up professions such as teaching and dentistry. “MS is very scary when you're young,” 36-year-old Weber tells the class. “You go through a period of adjustment; I did.”

Weber begins the course with an hour long slide show that could be entitled “Art History 101.” He shows great art, ranging from primitive paintings on the walls of pyramids to Pablo Picasso's modernism. Mixed in with images of the Mona Lisa and Georgia O'Keeffe's flowers are the powerful stories of great artists who overcame physical and emotional impediments. Michelangelo fought depression while painting the Sistine Chapel. Claude Monet's failing eyesight may have contributed to his impressionism. Vincent Van Gogh's long battle with mental illness shaped artistic icons such as “Starry Night.” Weber, who uses a wheelchair, expects no Monets or Cezannes from the class. He tells them to just relax and be themselves. “Whatever you create over the next few weeks is you,” he tells the dozen people who meet Tuesday and Thursday mornings. “Don't be concerned about being perfect for someone else; do it for yourself.”

Gary Ofrichter of Easton had been a dentist for 20 years when he was diagnosed about 10 years ago. He last practiced in 1995. The 53-year-old Ofrichter manages to cover his canvas with a rainbow of colors. "I was going to paint the Mona Lisa," he jokes. "But why show off?"

Tom Loper's right hand shakes so much he has difficulty putting brush to canvas. Steadying it with his left hand, Loper manages to spread an amalgam of dark colors across a canvas. "That's the inside of my brain," says Loper, 41, a former factory worker from Allentown. In the mid-90s, Loper sensed something was wrong. He'd shake, uncontrollably, and he didn't know why. At times, he walked as if he were drunk. His doctor ordered an MRI and, in 1999, Loper was told he had MS. In the devastating news, he found a measure of relief. "I was glad when I found out," Loper said. "I finally knew what was wrong with me."

Jean Childs started having double vision about 10 years ago. It took three months to diagnosis MS as the cause. Her doctor at the time, Childs said, told her the disease would go into remission. It didn't. A second doctor examined Childs and told her, "I'm sorry, Jean, it isn't going away." Childs, 53, a Catasauqua homemaker, relies on her deep faith and the support of others to cope with the disease. She paints in optimistic reds and bright greens, fashioning them into what look like watermelon slices on a summer picnic table. She calls it "Cantemos al Señor," or "Let's Sing Unto the Lord." "If it wouldn't be for coming here, I don't know what I'd do," Childs says. "It's so comforting to come here and totally relax."

Sitting next to Childs, Linda Briody dabs the outline of a tiny sailboat into a maze of turbulent waves and calls it "The Perfect Storm." It's as if she were sailing away on the boat and leaving MS behind. "I'm in the process of sinking," says Briody, 55, of Nazareth, "and I just float away."

Thierer puts the finishing touches on his painting. He signs it ET3, for Edward Thierer III. It gives him a good feeling. The last three years have been kind of a whirlwind for the former maintenance supervisor, who's no longer able to work. It started with a pain in his right leg, which he thought was a pinched nerve. At the same time, he'd come home from work exhausted. To his absolute surprise, an MRI showed Thierer had seven MS lesions on his brain. In a recent bout with the ongoing disease, his temperature skyrocketed to 103 degrees. It took four days to bring it under control, and Thierer has little recollection of that time. "If it weren't for this class, I'd be at home going crazy," he says. "Being involved makes it seem like there's still importance in my life."



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BRETT WEBER, PH.D.

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ARTIST'S TALK & RECEPTION:
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Brett Weber, a Moravian College alumnus, received his B.S. in Biology and his B.A. in Art in 1991. He went on to earn his Ph.D. in Neuroscience at Temple University in 1997. Brett was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) the week before completing his doctorate. Since then he has devoted his life toward understanding MS through science and art.

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