

Pikes Peak Community College has had its share of extraordinary students whose stories are so inspirational that those of us who know them feel privileged. One such student is Joe Bishop, a 25-year-old man who is gaining fame as a painter and studies oil painting with Laura Ben-Amots, Art faculty. Bishop is starting an art business with his adoptive mother, Pat Berney, and, as a team, they have already sold several paintings created by Joe. He has had two commissions already. A few months ago, Campus Life purchased one of his paintings, *Into the Sun*, and it's on display in the Campus Center.

What makes Joe's story extraordinary is that he was born with Agenesis of the corpus callosum. It is a rare birth defect in which there is complete or partial absence of the corpus callosum. Agenesis occurs when the band of tissue connecting the two hemispheres of the brain fails to develop normally. Joe has what are sometimes called "alien hands" that seem to have a mind of their own, and not in tandem with one another. One hands pulls at his shirt continuously. Sometimes he can literally give himself a black eye. He is non-verbal and uses a wheelchair for mobility. His eyes don't work in sync, so he turns his head to the side in order to see.

Pat explains, "The doctors believe that Joe's birth mother probably had a viral infection when he was in the womb," causing the birth defect.

Pat, a special education teacher, became Joe's guardian when he was 5. She was well aware of his disability, and ready for the challenge. They moved from Maine to Oklahoma, where he went to school. Originally considered a special ed student, only when was junior-high aged was he given an IQ test and found to have normal intelligence. Joe was put into regular high school classes from there on, and graduated from Ardmore High School in 2002. While Joe was introduced to art in high school, Pat says, "Everybody did the work FOR him, instead of allowing him to do it."

Joe was introduced to community college in Oklahoma, where a young lady wanted to help Joe take a class. She and Pat and Joe made a deal, that if Joe could pass the Accuplacer exam, he could get a laptop and take that class. He did, she did, and he did.

Joe and moved to Colorado Springs after a couple of years ago to live near Pat's family, and Joe started at PPCC in spring 2006. Looking for an elective that didn't require much homework, they selected a painting class; however, he had to take drawing as a prerequisite. This was the first revelation that Joe actually showed ability in art. Then, when he took that first painting class, with Laura Ben-Amots, he had finally found a way to communicate with the world – through art.

Fast forward to his current painting class with Ben-Amots this semester. On his Dynavox machine, through which an infrared beam hooked to a computer interprets his keystrokes into voice, he laboriously types out, "Painting IS my voice." When asked what he wants to convey to others through his art, Joe says, "I would tell people that everybody should follow their hearts and souls." Pat must steady Joe's arms while he types, so that he can make the finger hone in on the proper key. A perfectionist, Joe doesn't settle for poor typing either; he takes the time to correct his errors. To create one short sentence takes

him several minutes. Sometimes, while trying so desperately to convey his thoughts, he gets agitated, perhaps from excitement; perhaps from frustration.

Although a declared English major, when Joe started the painting classes, he was finally able to establish his own identity. He became Joe, the painter with a disability, rather than Joe, the fellow in a wheelchair who can't communicate, walk, or do much of anything for himself.

Ben-Amots and Joe have developed a very special bond in the classroom. Pat says, "Laura is about the only person that Joe will allow to actually paint WITH him." They have painted several things together. When asked what he finds special about Ben-Amots, Joe types "Enthusiastic, encouraging, and warm." Laura is clearly very, very proud of Joe and shows endless patience in working with him.

Laura started Joe learning to paint on a much larger scale because of his mobility issues, allowing freedom of movement and a more kinesthetic approach that suited him. Many of those paintings resemble large ocean waves. As his ability progressed, Joe has been able to produce much more detailed paintings, including a beautiful one of a horse, and one of the Garden of the Gods. One of his goals is to paint a nude, though. Laura and Pat have been talking about how to help him achieve the goal of painting the human body, with the detail required.

Sometimes Joe points to colors on a color palette to show what he wants to use, and other times Laura and Pat help select his colors. Pat has become an expert at mixing paints, and her role is to either hold his arm to steady it, or hold the palette for him. Joe has a special brace on his arm, with a ball to cup his hand around, and a hole that accommodates different sizes of paint brushes.

Laura says, "Without realizing it, Joe creates community. When the students watch him, and see how I work with him, how his mother works with him...they kind of soften." Undoubtedly, they are humbled by the tenacity and the love of this painting duo. Joe says of his mother, "We are simply one person."

Sometimes Joe paints with frenzy; other times, he is calm and his movements more subdued. Occasionally, he breaks into his own laughter at a private joke, or perhaps sheer joy.

There is a young man at the Air Force Academy, an engineering major, who is developing a sort-of robotic arm for Joe. Made of metal, they're hoping this arm will limit the range of motion, and keep Joe's phantom arms under control. Hopefully, it will give him more freedom to function a little more independently of others. Pat wants to get a mobile art easel for him as well.

Pat credits OASIS, PPCC's Office of Accommodative Services and Instructional Support, for enabling Joe to attend college through providing adaptive equipment and special accommodations. She and Joe are very grateful for their assistance.

Because Joe can take only one or two classes at a time, he still has about four semesters before he graduates, but he is determined to get an associate's degree.

Rest assured that Joe's life outside of college is busy and fulfilled. He loves swimming, because that is one way that he can free his body and just float. "When he was younger and smaller, he spent hours and hours in a pool," Pat says. Swimming and painting have both provided Joe the most freedom of movement and expression of anything in his life. He enjoys bowling, country music, the outdoors, traveling, eating out, and yes, girls. Pat reports that he loves shopping for clothes and any activities where he can be around people.

Joe and Pat's new art business is called, "Beyond my Wheelchair," and their web site is nearly complete. When it is ready, view it at joe.beyondmywheelchair@yahoo.com.

When you see Joe and Pat around the halls at Centennial Campus, know that inside a body that is spastic and doesn't work well, is a mind that does. His mother says that very few people have the patience to talk to Joe, and wait while he responds because it's such a laborious procedure. But, if you do take the time, you will see a gentle, loving spirit who has found his voice. As for Pat – her name should be submitted to those national contests for Mother of the Year. Her determination and dedication to her chosen son is truly extraordinary. They are a team, and they are one.