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Charting a New Course Through Meaningful Occupation

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Charting a New Course Through Meaningful Occupation

Abstract

Rory Odom, an artist and United States Marine Corps Veteran based in Florida, provided the cover art for the Spring 2020 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT). "Turtles All the Way Down" is an 8"x10" oil painting on canvas. After a tragic accident changed the course of Rory's life, painting gave him hope. During rehabilitation, Rory sought opportunities to challenge himself and build technical skill as a painter. His bold use of color and signature impressionist style convey emotion and movement. In the face of adversity, meaningful occupation helped Rory chart a new course in life.

Keywords

occupation, occupational therapy, art, painting, impressionism, adaptive sports

Credentials Display

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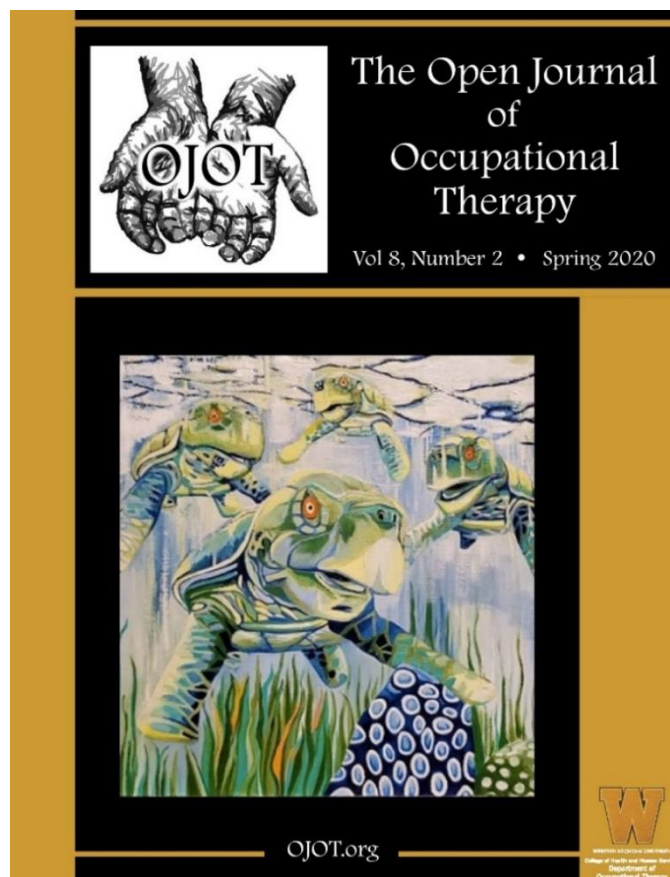
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In Ernest Hemingway’s novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, the central character, an elderly fisherman named Santiago, is an expert at his craft. When Santiago endures a streak of bad luck, he sails into uncharted waters to cast his line. When something heavy tugs at his line, Santiago struggles for 2 days and nights to reel in the fish. Once the fish is in sight, Santiago realizes he has caught a marlin even larger than his fishing boat. Instead of releasing it, Santiago continues to fight. “Now is no time to think of what you do not have,” writes Hemingway. “Think of what you can do with what is there.” In the novel, the marlin symbolizes a great struggle that brings out the best in Santiago. Determined, Santiago kills the marlin with his harpoon. During the voyage to shore, a school of sharks devour the marlin. As Santiago attempts to fight off the sharks, he drops the harpoon. He is now defenseless. Santiago arrives home battered. Hemingway writes, “But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed, but not defeated.” During life’s battles, we need hope to survive defeat. Through the storm, we prove the strength of our character.

Like Santiago, Rory Odom has overcome storms to prove the strength of his character. Rory, an artist and United States Marine Corps Veteran based in Florida, provided the cover art for the Spring 2020 issue of *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy* (OJOT) (see Figure 1).

“Turtles All the Way Down” is an 8”x10” oil painting on canvas. After a tragic accident changed the course of Rory’s life, painting gave him hope. During rehabilitation, Rory sought opportunities to challenge himself and build technical skill as a painter. His bold use of color and signature impressionist style convey emotion and movement. In the face of adversity, meaningful occupation helped Rory chart a new course in life. Rory Odom grew up in the small town of Red Level, Alabama. As a child, Rory knew he wanted to join the military and travel the world. “I wanted to see if I could be one of the best, a Marine,” he said. In 1996, Rory graduated from high school and enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. He served with the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (24th MEU) stationed in Jacksonville, North Carolina. The 24th MEU embarked on a 9-month deployment on the USS Wasp, a United States Navy multipurpose assault ship capable of transporting troops, cargo, and military vehicles. Rory participated in peace keeping missions in thirteen different countries. “Ship life was non-stop,” said Rory. “There were operations going on 24 hours a day.” As a member of the Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron (HMLA-269 Squadron), Rory’s primary role was to maintain weapons systems for 27 aircrafts, including Harrier jets and Huey helicopters. Rory’s outstanding service was recognized with several awards, including the Armed Forces Service Medal, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, the Kosovo Campaign Medal, the NATO Kosovo Medal, a Good Conduct Medal,

Figure 1
Cover Art for *OJOT* Vol 8, No 2, Spring 2020



and a Sea Service Deployment Ribbon. Rory also received the Meritorious Unit Commendation with Letter of Commendation. After 4 years of service, Rory was released from his military obligations with an honorable discharge.

In 2000, Rory joined the United Association of Plumbers and Steamfitters Local Union No. 52 in Montgomery, Alabama. While making progress toward his apprenticeship in oil well construction, Rory simultaneously began working with the Local 52 to build power plants. Rory left Alabama to work with several deep-water drilling contractors servicing the oil and gas industry. A few years later, he returned to Alabama as a journeyman welder. In addition, Rory managed an offshore welding shop for drill ships and serviced nuclear power plants during outages. A highly skilled craftsman, he was assigned the difficult jobs. “I was a very specific kind of hand welder,” said Rory. “I could fabricate just about anything from metal.” Rory continued welding and servicing oil wells throughout the United States for 9 years.

On October 13, 2015, a tragic accident changed the course of Rory’s life. After losing control of his jeep, Rory crashed and was thrown from the vehicle. The injuries he sustained were nearly fatal. Rory broke his pelvis and nearly every one of his ribs. He suffered a traumatic brain injury and collapsed left lung. Rory’s aorta was severed in two places. He also sustained a complete spinal cord injury at the thoracic (T-11) level. Because of the complexity of his injuries, Rory was airlifted to Baptist Medical Center South in Montgomery, Alabama. Doctors performed a tracheotomy to keep his airway open for breathing. Rory remained in a medically induced coma for 3 months. “It was touch-and-go for weeks,” he said. “I was brought back to life many times.” Rory came out of the coma on December 20th; however, he remained in the intensive care unit until he could breathe on his own.

When Rory was medically stable, he was transferred to an inpatient facility for intensive rehabilitation. Within a few weeks, he developed two Stage 4 ischial decubitus pressure ulcers. He required plastic surgery to repair the damaged tissue. After surgery, Rory returned home to determine the next course of action. During this time, he began to explore creative arts. “Some friends and family knew that I could draw a little, so they brought me watercolor paints,” said Rory. “It was a matter of generalizing my drawing skills into painting.” At first, Rory did not know what to paint. “I also did not believe I had the skill set to paint certain subjects, or at least at the level I wanted to,” he said. Rory’s first painting (see Figure 2) is a 12” x 16” oil painting on canvas. The scene portrays Rory and an unknown male figure looking down on the scene of the accident.

“This was my first attempt at painting,” said Rory. “It might not look like much, but it definitely helped me to reshape my life.” From time to time, Rory likes to look at the painting. “I think, what if I would have changed this or that,” he said. “Some things are better left as reminders.”

Figure 2
“Untitled” (2016) by Rory Odom



In 2016, Rory was referred to the inpatient Spinal Cord Injury Recovery Program at Brooks Rehabilitation in Jacksonville, Florida. He received physical therapy, occupational therapy, and recreational therapy services. “It was a spinal cord facility so the therapists knew what they were doing,” said Rory. “They knew when they needed to push me and when to back off.” One of Rory’s favorite things to do was work with therapists to find new ways to challenge himself. He also took advantage of the comprehensive adaptive sports and recreation programs available at Brooks Rehabilitation. “I tried nearly every adaptive sport they have to offer,” he said. Rory learned different ways to work out at the gym. He also joined adaptive bowling and golf leagues that met on a weekly basis. “The social aspect was huge,” he said. Rory believes the biggest benefit that came from participating in the adaptive sports programs was not related to physical activity. “Of course, I wanted to run 10K races again, but I think maybe the best thing that happened was finally realizing I did not need my legs anymore to participate. And that is okay.” Rory has many fond memories of rehabilitation at Brooks. “Everyone treated me with incredible kindness right from the start.”

Rory initially relocated to Jacksonville, Florida, to participate in therapy. He soon realized the city was also a good match for his extracurricular activities. “Jacksonville is very accessible,” he said. “They have every kind of adaptive sport you can think of.” Rory continues to enjoy an active lifestyle that involves engaging in a variety of physical activities. “I enjoy kayaking and cycling the most, but cycling is really my thing,” he said. In 2018, Rory traveled to Orlando to participate in the National Veterans Wheelchair Games. He entered eight events including the 10K hand cycle, discus, shot put, javelin, weightlifting, and table tennis. He brought home five gold medals and one bronze. Rory plans to remain in Jacksonville for the foreseeable future. “It is pretty advantageous to live here.”

In 2018, Rory made the decision to commit more of his time and energy to painting. To build technical skill, Rory imitated artists he admired, including Vincent Van Gogh, Guy Harvey, and George Rodriguez. “If they can do it, I can do it,” he said. With practice, Rory transitioned from watercolors to oil paints. He found new ways to challenge himself. “I never thought I could paint a face,” he said. So, Rory painted a self-portrait. “Van Gogh Selfie” (see Figure 3) is a 16” x 20” oil painting on canvas. “Little victories like this showed me I could do it,” he said. Rory refers to his self-portrait as a work in progress. He updates the painting on occasion. “I am not quite sure when I want to finish it,” he said. “Maybe this year.” Rory says this painting is one of his favorites. “I want the finished product to be wild and colorful,” he said. Determined to succeed, Rory has improved his technical skill and self-confidence as a painter. “Today, I feel like I can paint just about anything,” he said. “It is just a matter of doing it.”

Figure 3
“Van Gogh Selfie” (In Progress) by Rory Odom



Rory draws inspiration for painting from his favorite books and life on the open water. As a Marine and off-shore welder, Rory spent years living and working on the ocean. “I try to spend time on the water as often as possible,” he said. “Old Billfish” (see Figure 4) is a 12” x 16” oil painting on canvas. The painting represents one of Rory’s favorite novels, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and his love of nautical themes. His bold use of color and signature impressionist style convey emotion and movement. “After reading the book again, I wanted to put my own spin on it,” he said. In the novel, the sea symbolized life itself. Hemingway believed that in life, everyone must find their own niche. For Rory, that niche is painting. In 2019, Rory made the decision to focus on painting full time. He created an Instagram account titled *Soulshine Artworks* after one of his favorite blues songs. “When I was in the hospital, my friends sent me messages with that song,” he said. “It always kind of stuck with me.” Rory is using social media to share regular updates on his colorful paintings in various stages of progress, and in their finished

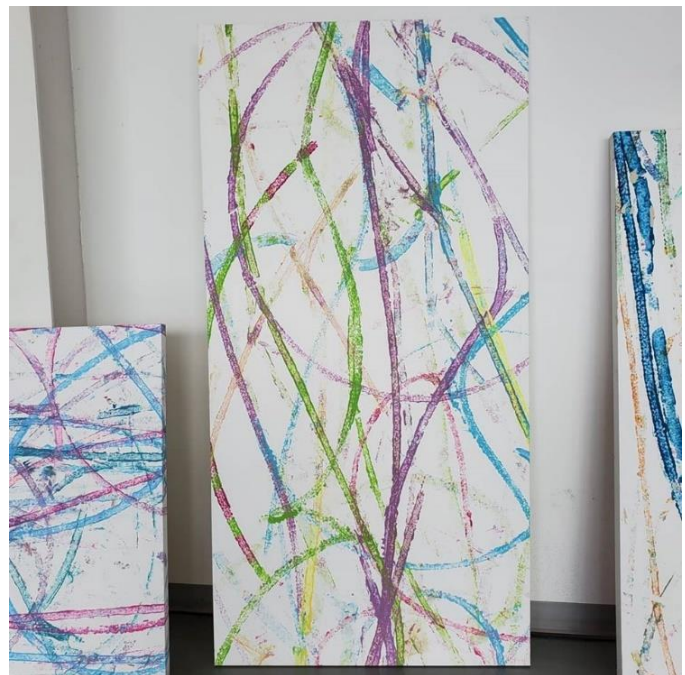
form. Rory also sells his paintings at local art festivals. His painting “Turtles All the Way Down” sold at the Gasparilla Festival of the Arts in Tampa, Florida. Rory is now working with a local company to make prints of his paintings. He hopes to sell them at the Riverside Arts Market alongside the other local artists.

When Rory is not in his studio creating beautiful paintings, you will find him volunteering with community organizations in Jacksonville. As a member of the Mayor’s Disability Council, Rory shares his time and expertise to improve the lives of people with disabilities in Jacksonville. Rory also volunteers with the Independent Living Resource Center (ILRC), a non-profit organization that promotes self-empowerment and equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities. “Abilities in Art” is a community-based project that pairs art and disability awareness. The annual event takes place at the

Figure 4
“Old Billfish” (2020) by Rory Odom



Figure 5
“Abilities in Art” Project (2020). Photo by Rory Odom



Riverside Arts Market in Jacksonville. Every year, volunteers coordinate an interactive art project for members of the community. In 2019, participants used wheelchairs to apply colorful stripes of paint across a large canvas (see Figure 5). Service dogs were encouraged to contribute painted paw prints. The canvas was stretched onto wooden frames to create paintings that can be sold at auction. Rory has donated several of his own paintings to auctions to raise money for the ILRC.

When a tragic accident changed the course of Rory Odom's life, painting made it easier to face the unexpected. In the face of adversity, Rory remained hopeful and determined. Like Santiago, the fisherman in Hemingway's tale, Rory did not dwell on what he did not have. He focused on what he could do with what remained. Through the storm, Rory has proven the strength of his character. As a Marine, Rory will continue to enjoy an active life and serve others in his community. As a craftsman, he will continue seeking opportunities to challenge himself while building technical skills as a painter. Rory looks forward to selling his wares at the Riverside Arts Market in the coming months. Until then, you will find him working diligently in his home art studio creating bold and beautiful impressionist paintings.

View more of Rory Odom's art work in the OJOT Gallery

https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/ojot_occupationandartist/30/

Other Resources

Learn about the Adaptive Sports and Recreation programs available at Brook's Rehabilitation:

<https://brooksrehab.org/services/adaptive-sports/>

Follow @soulshineartworks on Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/Soulshineartworks/?fbclid=IwAR0upmPl6ConzQu9neWy-TkPha1oEv9LAnYzEIMnmbKGTdFWc196eLkfqEw>

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