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NEWS

Different kind of medicine

Wounded veterans find outlet, release and expression in learning to draw

By [Jeanette Steele](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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CARLSBAD — Jon Copsey doesn't even remember creating the elephant drawing that now hangs on the Carlsbad gallery wall.

"If you told me a guy named Mike did it, I'd be like, 'Cool,'" the 23-year-old Marine said.

That's the traumatic [brain injury](#) talking. Copsey, a [Camp Pendleton](#) lance corporal, was gravely hurt in a 2008 car accident on the way back to base. You wouldn't know it by looking at him, because the tall, athletic infantryman doesn't have a visible scratch. But his short-term memory is shot. It can happen when the brain bangs against the skull in a crash like his.

Copsey participates in Pendleton's Wounded Warrior program, where he met the Solana Beach artist who persuaded him to draw to escape from stress and kick-start his mental processes.

Once the Marine was convinced that art wasn't lame, he grew to like communicating his thoughts in colored pencil.

"It was kind of an outlet for how I felt at the time," Copsey said Saturday at the opening reception for the exhibit "A Show of Patriotism: The Art of Healing Heroes," at Carlsbad's Front Porch Gallery.

"When you first get hurt, you remember what you used to be like. But you can't do the things you used to do. It kind of helps you to put out how you feel that day," he said.

Joel Harris is the Solana Beach artist who has shown a lot of tough Marines and other veterans that art can be a different kind of medicine.

Since 2007, he has volunteered at the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital in La Jolla and at Scripps Memorial Hospital in Encinitas, where Pendleton's wounded warriors come for rehabilitation.

"The changes I see in people are week-to-week changes. They lose their handicaps," said Harris, who also teaches drawing at the Solana Beach library. "They get caught up in the images and the magic we're creating," he said. "In the middle of it, they say they forget that they are supposed to be feeling pain."

He starts with a pile of photographs and magazines and encourages the patients to draw what inspires them.

Shane Kruchten, 26, admits he thought it was dumb at first.

The former Marine lance corporal was injured by a booby-trapped door in Fallujah, [Iraq](#), in November 2003. He came home with two broken legs, a broken back and steel pieces holding his skull together. And art was supposed to help?

“It’s a release,” he said at the exhibit opening. “It keeps your mind busy. Your mind goes from one busy to a different busy.”

Harris also works with people paralyzed by spinal cord injuries. If they can’t move their hands, he draws for them.

The artist pointed to one pencil-on-paper piece hanging on the gallery wall. It shows a fishing boat on a lake, with a mountain in the background.

The bedridden patient described the scene to Harris. It was one of his favorite memories from home. At first, the artist drew the mountain as a sheer slope, then turned it into a craggy peak upon direction.

“My reward is when I see them brighten up,” Harris said. “Sometimes I’m the only guy who walks in there who isn’t medical. I’m the guy who brings the fun.”

The Solana Beach resident knows hospitals firsthand. At age 3, he suffered paralysis and lived in and out of medical centers. Now in his 60s, Harris still displays a slight limp.

“I couldn’t walk for a number of years,” he said. “That’s why I started to draw.” He hopes to turn the Carlsbad exhibit into a nationally touring show.

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John Gastaldo

Marine Jon Copsey talks with his teacher, artist Joel Harris, beside Copsey's drawing of an elephant on display at Front Porch Gallery in Carlsbad.

Details

The Art of Healing Heroes

When: Through Sept. 5.

Where: Front Porch Gallery, 2903 Carlsbad Blvd., Carlsbad. Admission is free.

Information: (760) 795-6120, theartofhealingheroes.com



Photo by John Gastaldo

Solana Beach artist Joel Harris (left) and Marine Lance Cpl. John Copsey view the exhibit of wounded service members at the Front Porch Gallery in Carlsbad on Saturday. John Gastaldo / Union-Tribune photos

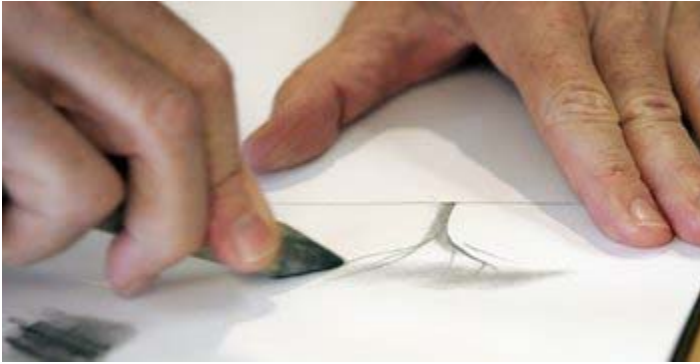


Photo by John Gastaldo

Joel Harris demonstrates his pencil and smudge technique for those who came to see work drawn by some of his students in the gallery exhibit.

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2010/jul/11/different-kind-of-medicine/>