

Alder Crocker, brain and spinal cord injury survivor, abstract expressionist painter shares his story

2021 Virtual Speakers Series: Moving Forward: Personal Perspectives on Life after Brain Injury

*** Originally recorded on September 30, 2021. *** [Listen to it here.](#)

JOAN BANKS-SMITH
00:05

[music] The Northern New Jersey Traumatic Brain Injury Model System proudly presents moving forward, personal perspectives on life after brain injury, a virtual speaker series for individuals with brain injury, family members, and friends, sponsored by Kessler Foundation and Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation.

JEAN LENGENFELDER
00:26

This series is sponsored by the Kessler Foundation as part of our TBI model system grant, which is funded by the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research. It's now my pleasure to introduce Alder Crocker. In 2018, Alder Crocker sustained a spinal cord injury and a traumatic brain injury from a freak accident that occurred as he was jogging into the ocean while on vacation in Mexico. Although he has range of motion in his shoulders and arms, he has no movement in his fingers. To help improve muscle memory, Alder participated in four art therapy sessions while a patient at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation. In his own words, "And the darndest thing happened. As soon as I had a brush in my hand, images and colors began to flood my consciousness. And quite miraculously, I was able to paint," the beneficiary of acquired Savant syndrome. The traumatic brain injury had somehow uncovered latent artistic ability. It is our great pleasure to welcome Alder Crocker or, as he refers to himself, the accidental painter.

CROCKER 01:46

My name is Alder Crocker. It's a pleasure to have this opportunity to speak with you today. Well, I don't really watch that video a lot. But boy, it brings back a flood of memories. And the one thing that I take out of it is-- the two things actually are that I'm really very, very fortunate that I had Kessler on my side. There are a lot of opportunities to choose different rehab facilities, but a lot of my friends-- I live on the East Coast in Connecticut. A lot of my friends knew about Kessler, and it was really the only choice for me. And I was very fortunate to have a spot. And ultimately, it ended up completely changing my life. And the second is that I'm really fortunate I had a lot of friends to help me along the way. And that's kind of really what's gotten me here today. But I think, if it's okay, while that video was pretty comprehensive, I'll sort of walk you through it a little bit more. And basically, what happened was very simple - I'm just going to push this back for a second - was that I'm on vacation, second day in Mexico. I hadn't had a vacation in about two years and was with my wife and about eight friends. It was a group thing, and we had just gone ATVing in the morning. It was terrific, just had lunch, and it's sort of towards the middle-end of the day. And it was, "Let's go in for a last swim."

CROCKER 03:04

And I thought, "Okay, what the heck?" I was a big ocean swimmer my entire life, the bigger waves better, one of those knuckleheads that used to carry fins in my trunk and sort of chase after bad weather and [flatcom?] day, of course. And so we're like, "Let's go in." So I thought, okay, do the old man's jog. I'm 58 right now. I was just about to turn 55 then. Do the old man's jog in. And I'm in about - I don't know - six, eight inches of water, and the sand gave way a little bit underneath my left foot. It

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sort of came off balance, and then my knee gave way. And sort of when you bend and tuck, you do a little somersault. Well, I did that, and I whipped around. But I was too far close down to the ground. And my head hit the sand, and immediately, I snapped my neck like a twig, just like that. And immediately, I was 85%, paralyzed. As they said, Jeannie said, I can move my shoulders and my arms, but I have no use of my fingers, but I can move my wrist. But I knew immediately that I was paralyzed. And it was crazy. It literally happened in one second. I'm just jogging. I tripped and bam, and I hit my head. And I hit it severely hard, and I had a huge crown on it for about three months or so. And so immediately, I was paralyzed. I was fortunate, if you can call it that. My brother-in-law had a similar accident five years before that on Long Island. He was swimming in three feet of water. I was next to him.

CROCKER 04:31

And he went down, and he hit a little berm, hit his head, broke his neck also, but he was incomplete. He's walking today. Thank goodness. But what he didn't do was he didn't close his mouth, and he swallowed a whole lot of seawater. And so I was fortunate, at the presence of mine, that I was able to move my arms just a little bit. And I popped up over the water and held it and then put my face down in the water and hoped that somebody would come and get me. And it happened about 15 or 20-plus seconds later. My wife and a friend came back and saw me, didn't realize why I was floating in a foot of water by then. And they got me, and they turned me over. And immediately, I had said to my wife, I said, "Oh my God. I'm paralyzed. I can't move anything. I'm just like Anthony," my brother-in-law. And then they moved me up onto the beach. An interesting thing happened, though, which I really haven't told anybody until I was just thinking about today's presentation, was that when I hit my head, I did see lights, if you will. What I saw was, in essence, it was a black and white X-ray of my spine and my skull. It was coming down, except it wasn't black and white. My spine and my head were green, like a circuit board, very strange. And what I saw were exploding lights, orange and red and yellow and white and a light blue. And it was just obviously, for an instant, a fraction of a second. But I see it every day, actually, when I wake up. It's just one of those things that I'll remember for the rest of my life. But I knew immediately. So I knew right off then that something-- we've all knocked our heads every now and then, but this was obviously completely different.

CROCKER 06:12

Thank goodness my wife, she sort of, what I say, CEOed the heck out of it and told all of our friends call American Express, whatever, because they help everybody, call the hotel, call these people, call the nurse, people that we know in the States, helped get them out. And 12 hours later, thank goodness, I was airlifted. My wife essentially stole a Learjet or a Med Jet, if you will. But what had happened was that, as soon as I was on the ground and they had turned me over, the first thing I said to myself was, "Be strong." So as you saw in that video, there were T-shirts that said be strong and a few other things. That's what I chanted for the first 20 minutes, and that's all I kept doing was be strong for myself, be strong for my family. And then I passed out, and I was pretty much in a coma for, I want to say, a day and a half, almost two days. They flew me to UCLA to the ICU, put tubes in me, and they operated on me. In fact, at first, they said, "There's nothing we can do. We're just going to give him an hour's operation. He's more severe than we had thought." And then some other doctor

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walked in the room, honestly, and said, "Wait, I think I can do something else." And they ended up putting rods in my neck and screws and all that, and straightening it and tightening it a little bit more so that I would actually have movement of my neck in a way that I wouldn't without that, so very, very fortunate. I ended up spending three weeks in the ICU, but I'll get into the painting aspect, if that's okay and sort of how I got there and how Kessler was instrumental in me, where I am today, as you can see some of the paintings behind me. When I was in the ICU and I woke up, they didn't know how to communicate with me. I had tubes down my throat, tubes in my nose, tubes everywhere. I was a pincushion.

CROCKER 08:12

And so we had a conversation board, and it's about two feet by three feet. And it had stick figures and letters and words and all that. And I used that for two days to communicate with my wife and the nurses and the doctors and the surgeons and all that. And that was traumatic in and of itself because I never thought I would speak again. I had no idea what was going on. And what I kept saying was, "Be strong. Be strong. You're going to get out of this." And slowly but surely, thank goodness, with everybody talking to me and I could hear, I just couldn't speak. It was very strange. I thought that I had a traumatic brain injury that I would not be able to get out of to where I am today. And I was very fortunate that, little by little, everything started to get back into shape. And then they took the tubes out, and I was able to speak, which was great. And then the next thing they did was immediately put me into exercise. And so I was having black dreams, really dark dreams. It was a very difficult thing to happen at the very beginning. I didn't know what was going on. People couldn't really tell me, "Well, you're going to get over the black dreams." But I knew that, ultimately, I would. But it was very-- you have to plot yourself one step at a time. And everything that they did for me with exercise, moving my arms, trying to get some muscle movement back, sitting me up and everything, but also eating when I was-- or drinking actually. I wasn't able to eat for about six weeks. But I had to do a lot of breathing exercises, as you can well imagine. And so they were essentially testing me every two hours. And every four hours was some different type of protocol.

CROCKER 09:51

And the way that I approached it was as if everything was a challenge. And for some reason, when I came out of-- when I basically awoke, I thought, "Oh, my God. I didn't die." And I could not have been happier with the fact that I was alive. And I thought, "No matter what state I'm in, I'm alive and I will figure it out. And I have friends and family around." The next thing it was, okay, it's a challenge. And everything I did moving forward was, okay, now I have to move the spoon to my mouth. And if I spilled something, I didn't win that challenge. And I'm sure, just like you, I kind of like to win at everything. I don't like to lose. So it was do that again and do that again. And if I couldn't move a certain way or I couldn't turn on my side-- because at the ICU, they have what they call a lift team. They're two giant bouncer-looking guys, very nice guys, different sets of teams. And every two hours, they would come to your room, and they would tilt you on your side or on your other side. And they'd wedge you, and they weren't very good at making you comfortable. But they were good at turning you over. So you kind of have to figure out, "All right. Well, how do I make myself comfortable? How do I make myself able to overcome this challenge? How do I make

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myself breathe into that blue and white clear plastic tube where the ball goes up and down? How do I make that work?" And so it was always about a challenge. And so honestly, through until today, this day and moving forward, everything that I do I consider a challenge. So if I can win it, it's great. By being able to pick up a juice bottle, if you will, and not dropping it because I don't have use of my fingers, not dropping it is a win.

CROCKER 11:35

So I mentioned that just because that's kind of what kept me going in everything that I did, as well as the painting. So I spent three weeks in the ICU. And then, finally, I was able to be admitted to Kessler. And I got there, and the first thing that they did was put me in an electric wheelchair. And that was a fright into itself. I had no idea about it. And so I started to learn how to do that and had exercises every morning. And it was a pretty interesting approach because you're weighing everything possible on your mind, "Can I work again? Will I walk again? Will I have proper mental faculties again? Will I be able to use my hands," everything that is flying around. And yet, what Kessler is teaching you, what they were teaching me at that is, "Let's get your muscle movement together. Let's get your muscle movement back. And then, in the afternoon, let's work on occupational and see how you interact with your basic surroundings," which was terrific. The process for me was terrific. And then, after that, say 3 o'clock on, would be where the therapists, the shrinks, if you will-- but the therapists would come, and they would talk to us or me and try to figure out where I was headspace-wise. To make a long story short - and I apologize for droning on at this point - I spent every afternoon for the next two months until actually the painting therapy-- and my shrink, the therapist said, "You really shouldn't do that at Alder." But I said, "This is the only way I'm going to be able to figure out where I am." But every afternoon, I took my wheelchair after I sort of did a little Mario Andretti Indianapolis 500 sort of cruise around the place as fast as I could, with people telling me to slow down. And yes, I was 55 then.

CROCKER 13:27

What I did was I'd go outside, and I would sit outside. And I'd get in my chair, and I'd rock and I'd go back. And what I would say for two hours every day were all the things that I would never do again, "I'm never going to walk again. I'm never going to dance with my wife again. I'm never going to cook again. I'm never going to run up steps. Well, I didn't really like steps anyway, so that's fine with me. I'm never going to swim again. I will swim again. I will get in the pool, and I will swim again." And so I did this, literally howling at the walls for two months non-stop for me. And it was the most cathartic thing for me personally because I needed to see where the bottom was before I could understand where there could even be a top, right? I had no idea what the opportunities were in front of me. All I knew was that I was trying to move things and trying to do things every day, but I didn't know where my head was at. And I knew that that was the most important. If I had my head on straight, then the rest will follow suit for me personally. What I also did during this is I had two tremendous physical therapists and occupational therapists, Issa and Kira, and they put me through the regimen. And they worked me very hard. And what I did to make sure that I maintained the challenge approach was, every time I did something, I needed to do two more. So my rally cry for myself was two more, every single thing I did, two

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more. So if I was trying to figure out an occupational, how to use my fork, and it wouldn't work and the peas would fall off, I wouldn't get upset. I'd say, "All right, two more." And I'd work on it until I actually did it two more times or I did it successfully two more times. And for me, it was till it was successfully two more times.

CROCKER 15:17

And they would kick me out, and they'd say, "We're done with you. Your hour and a half is up." And I'd be like, "I'm not ready to go yet," because I had to do that. It wasn't a compulsion then, which the painting became for me. This is the rest of my life, and this is the only point in my life where I have an opportunity that I knew right then to push it as hard as I could. Of course, we all know now that, as soon as you get home, once you learn how to push it, you can push it as hard as you possibly can, which I try to do every day as well. So everything I did was two more, two more. And I thought, "Okay, this is great." And I'm working it, and I'm making things happen and stretching as much as I possibly can. And I'm moving things, and they're not going to places I want them to. And I was getting frustrated. And I'm fortunate that I'm generally a happy kind of guy. The glass is always half-full. That's just where I'm fortunate. I totally understand the half-empty. And I realized that there are ways and I know ways for myself to get out of the half-empty. But about four weeks or so in, I was having a couple of tough days, as we all do. And I went to one of the therapists and I said, "Okay, I don't want any shrinking. I don't do that. I don't want the, 'Well, you need to-- no, no. I'm past that. I'm old enough. I've got enough going on where I'm thinking about what it is that I'm doing every day. I think I'm on the right path, but I'm missing something. I need more. And I know you've got something in your back pocket, and so I need that.'" And she looked at me and she's like, "I don't have anything in my back pocket." I said, "Dig deep because I know you do. What do you tell people when they hit the wall, that they don't know necessarily where to go next and that they're frustrated? But they can see that there's something in the future, but they can't get there."

CROCKER 17:10

And she said to me two words that I use to this day. I probably told no less than 50 people as well. There are two very simple words, and they get me out of every single situation. And what I mean every single situation for me personally, every single one. The two words are very simple. They are for now, for now, F-O-R-N-O-W, for now. And what that means to me is that, in the way that she presented it to me was, no matter what you're going through right now, it's for now. In a half an hour, in 10 minutes, in 2 hours, tomorrow, that will change. Your circumstances will change. You won't be thinking about whatever it is that you're thinking about now later on because everything changes. Your moods change, the day change, the temperatures change, the light, the dark, the sun, the moon. Whatever it is, it changes, and so will you. Whatever you're going through is just for now, cathartic moment in my life. And so I utilized for now, be strong, two more, and howling at the wolves to help me not become depressed, like I saw other people doing. I was very fortunate that I made friends with a bunch of people, and we chatted about this in group scenarios, and what to do and how to sort of present ourselves when we're alone, but also with other people. It worked out very well for me, and I was very fortunate. And it worked out, honestly, for the other people that were in our-- I guess there were four other

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people in the group haphazardly. They'd obviously come and go. So I went through therapy. I was at Kessler for 10 weeks. And so about two weeks after the for now, I'm just about to go outside. It's a beautiful day. It's the middle of July. Excuse me, end of July. And I'm thinking, "All right, do I go six miles an hour today? And which loop do I do? And what kind of diamonds do I run around," just trying to pretend like I'm in a go-cart because I'm trying to keep the drive alive and keep momentum going.

CROCKER 19:09

And the art therapist, Chris Beirne, who works at Kessler, came by. Very chill dude, very nice guy. He came by and said, "Hey, Alder. What are you doing at 3:00?" And I said, "I'm not doing art therapy. That's what I'm not doing. I'm going to go outside. I'm going to do a bunch of other stuff." He's was like, "Great. Why don't you do a little art therapy?" I said, "I don't do art. The last time I did art was third grade when I sort of painted the fruit bowl. They called it compost." I stopped kind of really painting after that. I thought, "I'm not going to paint garbage," and became the class clown at that moment. And that didn't go anywhere. So I never went back to painting and thought, "Thank you. Have a nice day." Chris was very persistent. He said, "No, no, I really think that you should do this. It's great for muscle memory. It's great for just sort of understanding yourself in a different way. And don't worry. I'm not going to shrink you." Well, little did I know that that's exactly what he wanted to do, was to shrink me. And I say that because those were the terms that he and I used. He's like, "I'm not." I'm like, "You are." And it was a lot of fun because we had some great conversations. But what he really was doing was trying to get me to not think about my disability, not think about being in a wheelchair, not thinking that I have my ticky-tack on right now for how I use the computer. But my hands are not-- they're not usable. I can use tenodesis, as I'm sure some of you are familiar with. But after that, I can't move anything. So Chris said, "Come hang out with me." And I'm like, "Okay, why not? I'll humor you. You're younger than I am, so I'll humor you. What the heck?" So he brought it out, and he said, "We're going to do watercolors today." And I said, "The only thing I know about watercolors is that they're messy." And he said, "Don't worry. I'll take care of that."

CROCKER 20:54

And so he put the piece of paper down. He taped it down. And we started talking about, "Where's your head at? What's going on?" I'm like, "Chris, I don't want to do that. I like orange." So he put a brush in my hand. It was the strangest thing. He put the colors down on the little palette, water on it. He got the piece of paper out, and then he put the brush in my hand with a-- I don't have one next to me, but with a rubber tube around it so that I could grip it with both hands or just kind of tenodesis it and then be able to move it. He literally put the brush in my hand, and I put it in the paint. And I started to put the orange down. And as it said in the video, and as Jeannie said before, all of a sudden, all of these colors started to fly out of my head. All of these ideas, these shapes and these colors and the different way that things should go together. And I've been in marketing for 30 years, so I've been around creative, seen a lot of it, had a lot of art directors work for me, and. But I was a stick-figure guy at best. They used to say, "Alder, don't ever draw again. Yeah, I'm blind. Use your words. That's what they pay you for. Don't even pick up a pencil." So just it came into my hand, and it was an amazing feeling. And I looked at Chris, and he looked at me

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like, "What happened?" I'm like, "I need a blue." So I got another paintbrush, and I did a little bit of blue. And then, okay, I need a green or I need a black. But all of a sudden, I started painting, and it really was-- the muscle memory, it just came as if I had been painting before, and I had no idea what was going on. A year and a half later, a friend of mine-- I was having an art show, my first one. And he said, "I think you have this thing called acquired Savant syndrome." At that point, I said, "I don't know what you're talking about, dude. I don't know who you are, and I don't know what that means. Have a nice day."

CROCKER 22:45

He, thank goodness, was a little bit persistent also, and we ended up having lunch. And there's more, and then I'll tell you about that in a minute. Excuse me. So I'm with Chris. And all of a sudden, I'm just painting. He's like, "Are you sure you've never painted before?" And I said, "I don't know what's going on." He got another piece of paper and then another piece of paper. And all of a sudden, I started just banging out these little teeny paintings. And then, of course, as I'm really getting into it, "Okay, our time is up," as it always is, right? Whenever you're having the best time, time is up. You're like, "No, come back." So then, all of a sudden, the paintbrush, I took it out of my hand, and it almost was like a plug in and a plug out. But I still had ideas, but there wasn't the color rush, if you will. So I went outside, started howling at the moon again, but started still seeing these colors. And it was really cool. And I had no idea what it was, didn't even pay attention to it. A few days later, Chris and I go back. We start talking again and just about philosophy and life and kids and all that and, "Give me this. Give me that. Okay. No, I want this, that one over there. Okay. Let's tilt it a little bit. I need more water. All right, I didn't need some acrylic." And before you know it, I kept on going. And brains really are amazing, right? I mean, it's really fundamentally not unheard of, obviously, because it's been heard of, but I had no idea whatsoever that my brain was able to process that and was able to, all of a sudden, channel the accident and the traumatic injury that I had. And again, literally, it uncovered the latent ability to paint.

CROCKER 24:28

There are 100 to maybe 200 people in the world that have acquired Savant syndrome. The reason why they don't know it is because, if a friend hadn't told me, I wouldn't know, and I'd just be doing my thing in my studio. But we're very fortunate. But most of them are in math and in music, and it's on the autism spectrum. There was a doctor, the gentleman died about eight months ago. His name is Doctor Donald Trafford of the Trafford Center up at Wisconsin and one of the colleges up there. And he's one of the foremost authorities on autism. And the friend that I had met a year and a half later told me about him, but he explained the whole thing to me and how it worked. And ultimately, I was put on the registry after taking a battery of tests. Pretty crazy. So fast forward, I only had about four classes with Chris. But I was touched, and I was ready to go. And so I got home. My family had gotten me a kit. The next thing I know, I'm buying canvases left and right. And I'm painting stuff, and I'm literally paint, paint, paint, throw them away. Paint, paint, paint, throw it away, paint, paint, paint. And the part about the acquired Savant syndrome where they recognize that you are actually within the parameters of the syndrome is compulsion. So you feel compelled to paint, and I feel compelled to paint to this day. So I wake up-- literally, I wake up

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and I've got 20 ideas in front of me that I've been thinking about or that I had when I was dreaming. Or I look across the room and I see the TV, or I see my juice from the night before, or I see whatever it is that I see. And all of a sudden, I see shapes. And then, all of a sudden, designs start popping out. I probably have about 3 or 400 ideas a day that just I can't channel or stop, and it's not overwhelming.

CROCKER 26:21

It's just like I'm looking at something right now. I'm looking at the corner of the computer, and I can actually see several shapes in the corner up here. And I'm thinking, "Jee, that's a great contrast. Maybe I'll use that for my next painting." There's right angles or white lines or this. Oh, there are graphics. There's a blue up there. And I'm just looking at the Zoom in front of me, and it's literally given me about 10 ideas already. So it's crazy that way. So it's called acquired Savant syndrome or sudden Savant syndrome. And the Savant is that, all of a sudden, that's your thing. And so I don't really type anymore. I used to head up strategy. I had my own advertising agency. Then I worked for another company, and I did writing, and I did a lot of things creatively. But they're primarily strategic from an intellectual standpoint. I don't really do that anymore. I mean, I have the capacity, but I don't have the complete capacity. What I now have is the want and the need to actually do the creative myself, as opposed to thinking about how it will work in 10 different ways from a strategic standpoint. So my brain changed, and it was because of, as I say to people, the bonk I got on my head. Well, the bonk on my head was like a hammer to the head. It was that hard. And I'm very fortunate. So fast forward a little bit. I kept on painting. About nine months or so later, give or take, yeah, give or take a year or so later, a couple of friends of mine came over. And they looked at my work, and they said, "Wow, your work doesn't stink." And I said, "You're my best friends. I'm in a wheelchair. You're not going to tell me my work stinks, so get over it. Thanks very much. Have a nice day. And by the way, come paint with me, and let's have a glass."

CROCKER 28:09

More friends came over, and they said, "It doesn't stink." I'm like, "I'm not going to believe you, but thank you very much." And then they brought a curator over of a small art gallery in Norwalk, Connecticut. And I thought, "Great, nice young lady. She'll be here 5 minutes, 10 minutes. I'll offer her a diet Coke. She'll be in and out." Two hours later, she left. I was very fortunate. She said, "I want you to be the headline of my art gallery for February and March," which was right before COVID. And so I worked feverishly for another couple of months and pumped out a whole bunch of things, had a whole bunch of people to the opening. It was terrific, and I was very fortunate. I sold a bunch of paintings, and then COVID hit. Literally, March 7th was when my show ended. And what you see behind me as I'm pointing here-- and at the beginning, in the video, I decided that I'm really just flinging paint. I'm copying the greats, Kandinsky and Jackson Pollock, literally taking wooden brushes into vats of latex paint, getting it, scooping it, and flinging it and just flinging it and just doing this and that and trying to use both hands and swirling it around my hands and making a complete mess and enjoying it, but still copying people. And so I thought, "I need to stop flinging paint, and I need to start doing my own thing." And so I thought literally for about a week. And what I ended up doing was I take latex paint, and I put it in the brush. And I put it on the flat canvas that I use. And then, what I do is I put paint -

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excuse me - in squirt bottles. I know. It's very random. So I put it in a squirt bottle, and I put it like that. And I grab it, and I do my designs. And I thought, "That's interesting. That's another way to do it," because it's tiresome for me to do painting with a brush. I can do it for about a half an hour, and then I just start losing all energy because I don't have triceps.

CROCKER 30:09

I'm C-seven incomplete also. I'm sorry, C-six complete, so nothing from the arms down. And C-seven incomplete, so halfway right here, no feeling, feeling. So it's literally right down the middle. And so I thought, "All right, I can't really paint that much with a brush. That's a bummer. What am I going to do?" And so I brought that out, and I realized that that was a very cool thing. And so I thought, "Okay, well, what do I like?" Painters, they always say, "Alder, you should mind the depths of despair and the fear and the anger that you had after the accident. You should take all of that darkness in your life, and you should channel it into being into your paintings." And I thought, "Are you out of your mind? I lived that horribly for a long, long time. The last thing I want to do is to spend my time reliving the agony and whatever you want to call it, the despair, all of that stuff, everything, and channeling that into my art and then hanging it up on the wall and seeing it again." So it happened once, I channel it again, I paint it, and then I see it four times. I don't think so. I think the only thing that I'm going to do is say, "I can't believe that I'm still alive. I've got friends. I've got family. This is a good thing." Every day is a good day because, listen, I'm 85% paralyzed. I have an aide who comes at 8 o'clock in the morning, leaves at 3:00 in the afternoon. I've got one that comes at 8:30 at night or 9:00 at night to put me into bed. I'm in a Hoyer lift. It's like a crane, if you don't know. I can't do anything for myself, basically. But I can paint. And I figured, "If I'm going to paint, I'm going to be happy about it." So I literally take this squirt bottle, and I take my favorite things, which are - excuse me - symbology. I've always loved symbols. Don't know why, I just think they're very cool.

CROCKER 32:05

Complex systems and symbols go together. Think of weather. And then you look at the weather report and you see, for lightning, you see sort of the jagged lightning bolt, and then you see the clouds. Well, those are symbols, right? And they graphically represent something that the reader or the person is trying to tell you or show you or have you understand visually. I thought, "All right, I'm in a visual medium. Why don't I take some symbols?" And I started taking symbols. And I've always loved archaeology also, completely filled with symbols and ancient languages and alphabets. And I sort of churned all that together, and I combined it with - and I know this is long and drawn out, again - chaos theory, chaos theory in the most simplest forms because it's very complex. And I'm not going to get it 100% right. But it's basically everything comes together for a reason. And it may look like it's completely disassociated or disparate elements, like how the heck do these things come together? But they all come together and they work perfectly to create an independent, specific event. So when there is a hurricane-- and there was a hurricane, Henry or Henry, that came by Connecticut. What was it? About a month or so ago, and it was supposed to come right up Long Island. So here's Long Island. Connecticut's up here. It's supposed to come right up there and hit Fairfield, where I live, smack dab in the middle. Well,

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what happened was it veered off just a little bit because there was a low pressure here and a high there and a something there, and the ocean was whatever. Well, that's chaos theory. All those things came to be together, and it veered off at the last moment and missed us. That's chaos theory working at its best. Now, if you were to take out, as an example, one of the low pressures or whatever, it probably would've come and smacked directly into Fairfield.

CROCKER 33:54

So chaos theory works in both ways, either when it's supposed to happen or not supposed to happen. I thought, "All right. So with symbols and archaeology and art, how can I put all that together?" And so what you'll see here - I'm sorry it's not so clear - or there is a lot of really dense sort of art that goes together. But when you look at it, it all makes sense when it goes together. I mean, I didn't know what I was doing. Literally, for the first month, I was just putting stuff down on canvas. And I thought, "Wow, this stuff is kind of interesting. It actually works." I don't know if it works for everybody. I think it's kind of fun. And so I wake up every morning thinking I have another one to do. And so it's terrific. And that's what I'm very fortunate about, is that every day is a challenge. Every day, literally, is two more. Every day is literally for now. Some days, I don't feel like painting. And I realize that, "Oh, my God. Am I losing my compulsion?" And I realize it's just for now. And then, an hour later or generally the next day later, after I read a book or something, boom, I'm back into it and I'm pumping out art left and right. I'm fortunate that I have a couple of shows this summer. I might have a show in Las Vegas - excuse me - in October or November. I'm hoping to start maybe a clothing line, where I put my art actually on clothing, a lot of random things that are happening because why not, right? I think I've almost been able to do more in my wheelchair in my paralyzed condition after my traumatic brain injury than I was beforehand.

CROCKER 35:30

I was going through life doing things, and I thought I was making an impact. Family, friends and all that, it was terrific, and looking forward to retirement and all that. But I don't like to fail. And I figure, if I'm in my chair, well, people say, "There's a reason you're in your chair. You're going to change people's lives," or, "There's no reason," or, "There is a God. There's no God." Everybody has their own way about that. All I know is that, for me, if I'm going to be in this chair, I'm not going to sit in front of the TV. I'm going to go outside, and I'm going to do something. Or I'm going to stay inside, and I'm going to do something because, otherwise, it would be a waste of my life. I'm 58 now. I probably got another 20, 25 years. Well, they say, how do you eat an apple? One bite at a time. Well, I'm trying to take two or three bites a day, at least, because it's better than none. And that's kind of where I'm at these days. I'm very fortunate that Kessler is in my life. I speak to them on and off about research. I've taken a range of different tests with them. I haven't gone on any clinical trials, never quite been ready for them. But the future is available, and it's awesome because they're going to keep coming back to me, as are other places, if it's appropriate. And so I think that might be it. I hope that was a good enough story. And if anybody has any questions, I would love to take them. I think that's about it. Thank you so much.

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- FEMALE 3 37:02 How much do you think the support of your family and your friends played into your motivation and your success?
- CROCKER 37:16 I would say only a small amount. The reason I say that is because the motivation came internally. They were great to have around as support. But I don't paint for them. I paint for myself. Having them around and be supportive, honestly, as opposed to not supportive or indifferent definitely benefited me. But that's not why I ended up painting. And everything that I do, I do for myself or from within. So it's all about the challenge. It's all about two more or having to do it again. And just I hate to fail, right? So if I made a painting and I looked at it and I'm like, "That's garbage," well, then I'd paint over it, or I'd do something again. Sometimes, I found that family and friends were just like, "Oh, everything that you do is great." And I thought, "No, no, no, no. I need some harsh criticism, and that's how you get better." And so I am still my own worst critic or harshest critic. But it's a great question. I didn't want to rely on anybody else because I thought, "Well, you can't necessarily rely on people over a long period of time. They're great at certain intervals." But then, for me, they flatline after a certain period of time. Well, that's where I had to step it up.
- FEMALE 3 38:47 Yeah. I mean, your internal motivation and your gumption, it seems as though it wasn't diminished by your accident. It seems as though it was actually encouraged or pushed further. And the fact that you have the compulsion to paint, it's enviable to someone who-- one of my difficulties is starting projects and staying on task is horrible because I'm so distractable, but.
- CROCKER 39:27 I am too.
- FEMALE 3 39:28 Yeah. It's nice to see that you've been able to kind of push yourself in really with the things that you've said. And I hope that they work for me. I'm going to try them because I don't have that internal push anymore. I remember I used to wake up in the morning and be able to say, "Okay, today is a great day. Let me see. Do I feel like going to the zoo or do something?" And now, I wake up in the morning since my most recent brain injury, and it's blank. It's just blank. So I hope to use what you've done to be able to maybe give me a kick in the ass, so thank you.
- CROCKER 40:07 Absolutely. Absolutely. And I say this with 100% heart. I'm happy to talk to you. If you ever find that you're just in one of those moods and you want to talk to somebody to maybe pump you up and say, "Hey, let's paint together on Zoom or let's do something," I would be happy to hang out with you [crosstalk] or whatever it is.
- FEMALE 3 40:32 Thank you.
- CROCKER 40:33 It's tough. I mean, I wake up and I'm like-- I mean, I won't spill all my beans. But my wife, three months ago said, "You know what?" two months, three months ago said, "You know what? This is too much. I can't deal with this anymore. I'm going to divorce you." And I was like, "Wait. What?" And so all of my creativity just flew out the door that day. And then, about two days later, I said, "I can't not do anything, right? Okay. She's going to divorce me. I thought we were forever. And obviously, nothing's forever," which is why when I said at the very end of the conversation, "Nobody's

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there for you except for yourself, ultimately." And so for me, I think, "Well, all right. Do I want to be over here, or do I want to be over there?" And sometimes, I just want to chill out and read a book. But I kick myself and I say, "No, I've got to get out of bed." And this goes back to what that terrific therapist said to me. What you're feeling is for now, just for now. In a little while, it will change and you will feel completely different. And so I push myself. There's one more thing, if I may say. And this is actually what keeps me going every day, is I call it getting my whoopie cat on, long story about that I won't bore you with, but from a Led Zeppelin song and what have you. But getting my whoopie cat on every day, it's a state of mind that I try to get myself in. And the state of mind that I try to get myself in is how I feel when I'm dancing while nobody's watching.

CROCKER 42:13

Now people are like, "Oh, yeah. Dance while nobody's watching." If you think about it a little bit deeper, what do you feel like when you're dancing when nobody's watching? What you feel is your most confident self. You feel like you're in a joyful, joyous mood. You have the armor on that basically says, "Forget the rest of the world. I am my best person right now." No matter what I'm doing, I am my best person. I'm in that mode where I'm listening to music, whatever it might be. For me, it's Led Zeppelin and a couple of other random things, some electro swing. And I listen to it, and I just get into that mood. And I realize, "Yeah, God, I love this. And I'm in a great place." And then I try to bottle that. And so I remember that. I go, "Okay, I feel that. I'm good. Everything is good, no matter what's going on, because I'm jiving to my music and I'm hanging out, and I'm in a great place." Before I know it, wherever else I was, I'm not there. That was a for now. I am now in the, "I can handle anything. I can handle the divorce. I can handle not being creative. I can handle when my aide is late by an hour and I'm stuck in bed because I can't get up." And I'm just there going, "I'm holding onto her. What do I do when she's late? What do I do when it's snowing?" I listen to the music. I have an Alexa. I tell her to turn on, play a certain amount of music, and I get to that place. And I know. I apologize. I apologize, but that was a very long sort of description and discussion. But that's how I maintain my motivation, to always try to do one more, to do two more, to get out there. And maybe I hope that that might help you a little bit.

FEMALE 3 43:51

I'm sure it will.

CROCKER 43:56

It was a little random. I'm sorry. [crosstalk]--

FEMALE 3 43:57

No. That's okay. I thought somebody was trying to raise their hands because I wanted to-- so I'm a nurse. And one of the things that I used to teach my patients was for them to calm themselves. Especially if they're going into an MRI machine or something that's causing anxiety, I would have them-- and anybody can do it, and now I have to take my own advice. Imagine the calmest, happiest, sweetest, most relaxed moment or place that you have and go there. Just close your eyes and go there. And then create a combination of emotion, whether it's like Carol Burnett, pulling your earlobe or just rubbing your fingers together. And doing that over and over again, you actually create the association so that, in moments of real crisis, when you're having a panic attack or an anxiety attack, you don't need to mentally go to

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that place. It's like Pavlov's dogs that drool, just moving the motion with your hand and you automatically calm down. So even thank you for your secondary comment because now, I think I have to take my own advice. And I can do that, too. So I think I've got to attach it to feeling motivated. So in moments when I do feel motivated or I feel happy or encouraged, then that's when I should be attaching a tactile sensation to it so that I can actually go there when I wake up in the morning and there's a blank. So thank you again.

CROCKER 45:23

Terrific. That's a great idea. Thank you for sharing that with me.

LENGENFELDER 45:28

Alder, we have a question in the chat from Sharon. It says, art therapy, how do we expand it within the community?

CROCKER 45:37

Oh, jeez. That's a great idea. Okay. The community of rehabilitation or the community of, say, the local township?

LENGENFELDER 45:51

It doesn't specify in the question, so I don't know if you--

CROCKER 45:55

Let me double up on that. So in the community of rehab, I think having these conversations-- okay, to the community. Okay, thank you, Sharon. I think schools are a great place to start art therapy. I've been fortunate enough to speak in front of a couple of middle schools and talk to them about my accident and about art therapy and what it did for me. And I think everybody should take art. I took it in third and fourth grade. I think it's probably, in my opinion, better to take it in sixth and seventh or eighth grade because your brain is more formed and you have better things that you might want to actually be able to paint, or emotions that you want to get out there. But I think there are community centers that I'm going to be speaking with in the next couple of months that are art-related senior centers and community centers, activity centers, if you will. And it's just a matter of letting them know or showing them, making an example of somebody saying, "Listen, art therapy helped this person. I think, if you were able to bring art therapy here, that person might or your community would be helped as well." I don't know if that helps answer your question, Sharon. But I also think, from the rehabilitation standpoint, I wish Chris had come to me weeks before that. And I was also a patient at Gaylord Specialty Hospital up in Connecticut for my rehab when I came back, outpatient. And they don't really have an art therapy group there. They have a little bit, but they don't-- and I've been pushing for the last two years for them to really bring that as a source--

LENGENFELDER 47:48

[crosstalk].

CROCKER 47:48

--if you will, or a program because you never know when you're going to find somebody like me who, all of a sudden, wakes up out of a TBI and has the ability to paint. Well, nobody put a piano in front of me, nobody put math in front of me, and nobody put art in front of me until Chris did.

LENGENFELDER 48:08

There was another question in the chat from Alison. Were you always a motivated person, or has it increased since your injury?

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- CROCKER 48:17 Great question, Alison. It increased since the injury. And I mean, I was motivated before as much as the next person. I didn't like to fail then. But now, I hate to fail. And the reason I hate to fail is because I didn't die, and I think about that all the time. And sometimes, I think we all think about suicide. We're like, "Oh, my God. What the hell? How did I get into this situation? What's going on?" And the answer is you're alive. So you're alive, so let's do something with it. And at the beginning, I thought, "I'm going to chill out and watch TV." And I thought, "No, I can't do that." And so I had to push myself because I was being challenged by the people at the ICU, or I'd need to breathe for 10 seconds, like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 10, 11, 12, just because. All right, we're going to do this three times, or we're going to do it five times. And I thought the more that I did it, the better that I would heal. And I'm still teaching myself three and a half years later of things to do. I mean, I was making a joke this morning with Jeannie and Angela and Shelby that I'm still learning things about, "All right, if I want this and I want that over there, [inaudible] and do this and then hold that and then get that and use my teeth."
- CROCKER 49:35 Ta-da. I've just taught myself something completely different. And when that happens, I'm like, "Score. Today, I've done one thing that's positive that I couldn't or didn't do yesterday." And that's what keeps the drive alive, is that every day, I try to do one thing that I didn't do the day before, even if it's literally stabbing four pieces of corn or peas with my fork. I did it, but I didn't do it yesterday. Yeah, small victories are actually what would keep the drive alive for me. Painting is great. But I mean, if I don't drop a glass or a cocktail or a wine glass or my juice because I don't have use of my fingers, right, I'm clutching it, or you see me tipping here and there, well, I'm tipping but I'm not dropping. A year ago, I was tipping and dropping. So every day, I just try one thing, even if it's teeny because it just makes me say, "I'm still alive, and I'm going to beat this." I hope that helped.
- LENGENFELDER 50:49 Anyone else have any questions or thoughts they'd like to ask Alder?
- FEMALE 3 50:53 Alison stated that she works at a group home facility with people with TBI and is asking Alder if he's interested in possibly setting up a Zoom art class with them sometime in the future.
- CROCKER 51:05 Terrific. Absolutely. Alison, I would be very happy to do that. I see you in the upper corner of my screen. You've got your green and yellow and very colorful mask on, and I would love to. That would be terrific.
- FEMALE 4 51:17 I'm with a group of clients, so we're wearing masks right now.
- CROCKER 51:20 Sure, sure. Absolutely.
- FEMALE 4 51:22 But yeah, [crosstalk].
- CROCKER 51:23 I would be happy to do what I can.
- FEMALE 4 51:25 I will send you an email. I heard you say your email before. So I'll shoot you off an email, and we can make a schedule for that. That'd be awesome.

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- CROCKER 51:31 Terrific. Alison, thank you so much. And whatever I can do to help-- the person just asked a question. I'm sorry. It's not Alison because I'm looking at Alison, but the person before that, things every day. It's things that Alison just asked about that make me think, "Okay, if I can help one person, then it's worth whatever is going on that I'm helping that person." That's just kind of how it rolls for me. I hope that helps.
- LENGENFELDER 52:02 Rachel had a comment in the chat. She said, "Alder, I totally agree with the sound of music. I think it's very important to select a song or music that gets you up and go."
- CROCKER 52:15 Very true. And when I'm painting, I'm listening to all kinds of music. I listen to Pandora or whatever it is, and I have the music really loud, and it's great. I don't have synesthesia, which is when you see colors you hear music, or when you hear music you see colors. Mostly, when you see colors you-- when you hear music, you see colors. I have a little bit on the other side of that, which is, when I see things, I can hear music. So it's a bit on the other side. But my life is filled with music. And I liked music before. I mean, as much as the next guy, a couple of concerts here and there. Music now fills my life because it changes my mood. It makes me joyful. And it's really cool because now, I paint. And so I see something and I'm like, "Oh, that music. I haven't listened to Joe Jackson in 30 years, or I haven't listened to Miles Davis or Kanye in a couple of weeks," or whatever it is. I'm like, "I have to get that." I'll listen to that, and then I'll start paying. So it works for me on a lot of levels.
- FEMALE 5 53:22 Simply put, your presentation today was awesome. Your energy is unbelievable. Your accomplishments are just so inspiring. And I'm just so glad that Kessler asked you to present to us because we need to hear from you. We needed to hear from you. We needed to experience your energy, and we needed to see your accomplishments. Job well done. Keep it up. And I'd like to see and hear more. I took a course at the North Museum for senior citizens on collage, and they had a art reception and hung our art in the museum for four hours during the reception. And I felt like Mrs Picasso because my art was hanging in the museum. So I strongly recommend to everyone, do something. And for me, I can't paint, draw, or anything. But I was able to tear paper and glue it onto a board.
- CROCKER 54:29 Absolutely.
- FEMALE 5 54:30 And we did self-portraits, and we made our hands. And it was amazing. So art, 100. God bless you.
- CROCKER 54:40 You're so kind. And I'm humbled by that, honestly, by being here. But by hearing that, that's really amazing. But what you just said, though, is critically important. It's about creativity, not necessarily about painting. It's about creativity. We all have it inside us. I didn't know I had it. I got the bonk on the head, and now I have it times 10. But it's all there for us, whether it's a paintbrush or, honestly, if it's clay or glue and pieces of paper and collages. There are incredibly accomplished artists that all they do is collage. They take New York Times and they take this journal and they take that and - what is it? - People Magazine. And they mush it all up into whatever it is. And all of a sudden, it's something original and beautiful. I think we all have it inside us. I just

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happened to hit my head really hard to get it outside. But I think, as you just said, glue and paper. And it was really cool. I think we should all try it.

ANGELA SMITH 55:41

Alder. This is Angela.

CROCKER 55:43

Hi.

SMITH 55:44

I don't know if anybody's ever been upstairs-- it's not the clinical part of Kessler, but the research part of Kessler. There is a collage there that's made out of mass transit cards from the New York City subway system.

CROCKER 55:59

Very good.

SMITH 55:59

And they put them together to look like a painting of Henry H Kessler, who obviously was the founder of Kessler Institute. So if anybody--

CROCKER 56:08

That's [crosstalk]--

SMITH 56:09

--ever gets a chance to get up there to see it, it's really cool.

CROCKER 56:15

That's awesome. Listen, I'm handicapped. There are a lot of other people that are on this call that are handicapped, a lot of other people just in general that are handicapped. We don't necessarily know what to do or where to go. It's about self-confidence. For me, especially it's about every day going, "Okay, I can do this. Getting divorced, I've got this. I'm in a chair. I need a--" blah, blah, blah. Okay. But if I can be a little bit creative and I can make something, even if it stinks, but I've made it, that's a really cool thing that I didn't do yesterday. So I think, when we all talk about creativity and just little baby steps, these are the things that life is made up about. Life is made up of like five-second or half-hour or, in our instance because I'm talking a lot, an hour-and-a-half-long adventures. This has been an incredible adventure for me so far. And then there will be one after that. And there will be for all of us. With creativity, a terrific way to sort of keep the drive alive and the day going.

LENGENFELDER 57:17

There's another question in the chat. What are some of the struggles you deal with every day that aren't physical?

CROCKER 57:26

That aren't physical? Well, I can't reach far enough. That's not physical because physical is I can't lift something, in my mind. But I can't touch something. I can't get somewhere. Okay, maybe that's physical. And if you're thinking about merely emotional or intellectual, it's difficult to stay happy all the time. And you need to have a motivation. From your injury, any lasting effects? Alison, I'm not quite sure what you mean, Alison. I'm trying to think. That are not physical, any limitations. I'm very fortunate that I'm gregarious. So [crosstalk]--

LENGENFELDER 58:31

I'm sorry, any memory issues or anything cognitive--

CROCKER 58:36

Yeah. I apologize.

LENGENFELDER 58:37

--you still struggle with?

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- CROCKER 58:37 Yeah. I still do, actually. I take about every year or so a memory test, and I try to do memory online tests. Or even just, when we were kids, I'd get a two and a two, okay, and a two and a two. And it's basically the memory cards. I try to do that as often as possible. I try to read a lot. But it gets a little much, to tell you the truth, sometimes. So I try to do it in small spurts. But yeah, I do have some memory sensitivity. No memory issues yet, though, because I try to keep as tight as possible. Hope that answered it. And Jeannie, I'm sorry I've taken a long time.
- FEMALE 3 59:22 Do you have any, or did you notice in the beginning that you have to build up endurance to be able to paint for longer periods of time? Did you have any-- just being drained or just even by thinking the way that you think being drained?
- CROCKER 59:37 Yes. Absolutely yes.
- FEMALE 3 59:37 I would imagine. Do you slot rest time in during the days, or do you just kind of stop when you're shot?
- CROCKER 59:46 Both. Sometimes, I don't know when to stop. And then, all of a sudden, I'm just-- I bend forward, and I'm trying to lean about a foot or a foot and a half in. And I realize that my diminished lung capacity, all of a sudden, I can't breathe. I'm like, "Okay, okay." And then I lean back and I realize, "Okay, I think I just went a little bit too far." So what I try to do is I try to take-- every half an hour or 45 minutes or so, I drink more liquids, so cranberry juice, iced tea, water. And then that kind of picks me up. I drink coffee a little bit. That picks me up. But I don't really go for more than an hour at a time. At the beginning, I was trying to paint like this, and I couldn't do that for more than maybe five minutes, not even. And then I realized I'm going to get more bang for my buck in time by actually taking the painting and leaning it or the canvas and leaning it on the table. So now, I paint like you may have seen in the video. I paint squirt bottle down like that, and I turn my painting 90 degrees to basically change the direction of my painting. But it took longer than I had expected, but not really that long ultimately because the joy of my first painting that I thought was any good, I was like, "I need to do that again." And that kind of took away the tiredness. It became more of an excitement.
- FEMALE 3 01:01:16 Right.
- SMITH 01:01:17 Thank you, Alder, for a wonderful, wonderful presentation. And I mean, I can echo so many of the people who spoke or who put their comments in the chat, that your enthusiasm, your energy, your inspiration has really lifted us today. And I really thank you for that, and today going forward as well. So thank you so much.
- CROCKER 01:01:40 [crosstalk].
- SMITH 01:01:41 Thank you. I also want to thank all of the attendees. This is our last speaker in our series, but we are planning to do this on a more regular basis, maybe not four in two weeks. But we are probably going to be doing this more on a quarterly or three-times-a-year basis. I've had people ask me to keep these going and that they've been very helpful and informative and crucial to the brain injury community and the people

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who've been joining us. So thank you so much. Thank you, Jeannie. Thank you, Shelby. Thank you, everybody. We've had some people who have been here for all four speakers. I can't thank you enough for joining in to tell people about it, because we will definitely be doing it again in the future. And we thank you again. [music]

BANKS-SMITH 01:02:38

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