

Alder Crocker: Becoming a Professional Artist After Traumatic Brain and Spine Injury

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JOAN BANKS-SMITH
00:07

This is Joan Bank Smith from Kessler Foundation with another special Edition podcast celebrating World Art Day. Our host, Jessica Ganga, Communications and Digital Media Coordinator here at the Foundation, had the opportunity to speak with Alder Crocker, a traumatic brain injury and spinal cord injury survivor and an acquired Savant Syndrome artist. In May of 2018, while on vacation, Alder broke his neck and instantly became 85% paralyzed. While in rehab, after four brief art therapy sessions to help improve muscle memory, an artist was born. As soon as he had a brush in his hand, images and colors began to flood his consciousness, and he was able to paint, the beneficiary of Acquired Savant Syndrome. Before Alder had his accident, he had worked 25 years in marketing, was a partner in an agency, and worked with many other agencies in that industry, but was never a creative. Alder has also been a volunteer in many of the Foundation's research studies since his accident.

JESSICA GANGA 01:15

Can you briefly share your story about how you sustained a TBI and an SEI?

ALDER CROCKER 01:21

In 2018, in May, I was in Mexico with my wife and several friends. We were on vacation, and it was the second day of our vacation. In the afternoon, we decided to go for the last swim of the day, and the ocean was basically flat calm, and I used to be a big ocean body surfer, and I would love that. And so I thought, "I'll go in for the last part of the day, no problem, take a dip." And so I did the soft jog into the ocean, and I was jogging in about 8 or 12 inches of water, and I must have hit a soft patch of sand or a little bit of a divot. And I stumbled, and my left knee basically bent and gave way, and I tripped and I fell, and I turned on my left side, and I didn't turn hard enough in a somersault, and I hit my head into the sand, and I smacked it so hard that I immediately broke my neck, snapped it like a twig. And I was immediately paralyzed. And I saw all sorts of colors in my eyes, and I realized immediately that I was paralyzed because about five years before that, my brother-in-law had a similar type of an accident out on Long Island where he hit an underwater berm, and I actually pulled him out. And I remember the first thing that he said was after he had gotten out of the hospital was, "I wish I closed my mouth because I swallowed so much seawater." So the first thing that I did after I smacked my head and I knew immediately that I was paralyzed, couldn't move my legs, but I couldn't move my arms a little bit, was I took a giant breath of air, and I waited about 15 or 20 seconds until my wife and a friend found me.

GANGA 02:58

Thank you for sharing your story, Alder. And from there, how did your path lead you to art, which is what we're here to mainly talk about with you today is this beautiful art that you create. So from your injury on, how did you get into the work that you do?

CROCKER 03:18

Well, you're very kind. I hope that people like my artwork. Basically, something miraculous happened. I hit my head so hard that I uncovered latent painting ability. And it's something that's called Acquired Savant Syndrome. And I didn't know I had it for about a year, yeah and a half until a now friend of mine, another artist who had a similar accident, came up to me after my first art show and said, "If you'd never

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painted before, I think you may have this Acquired Savant Syndrome, which is on the autism scale. And there is a foundation called the Treffert Center, Dr. Darold Treffert out in Wisconsin, and they specialize in this." And so I went and I chatted with him, and after a range of tests, they agreed that indeed I was qualified for being an Acquired Savant. And essentially, as I mentioned, I hit my head so hard that I uncovered latent or hidden ability to paint. A lot of times people wake up after the coma or from this injury with musical or mathematical capabilities. I was fortunate enough to wake up with artistic capabilities.

GANGA 04:28

And how did you, I guess, find out that you were able to paint and that you had these artistic abilities? Was it a person that you had spoke to, or is it just one day you decided to pick up a paintbrush and begin painting?

CROCKER 04:47

Actually, it's a pretty interesting story, probably more so for me than listeners. But I was at Kessler Rehabilitation in New Jersey, which was terrific, and got me into great shape. And about 6 weeks into my 10 week stay there, their art therapist, Chris Burn, came up to me and said, "Alder, what are you doing this afternoon?" And I said, "I'm not going to art therapy, that's for sure." He said, "No. No. Come on. I think you should come on by." And I said, "No. I've got other things to do. I'm not an artist. I never painted before. I really don't even like the act of painting." He said, "No. No. Come on. I think you'll enjoy it. Besides, you're not doing anything. You're not busy." And I acquiesced. And I said, "All right. I guess I'll do it at three o'clock. I'll meet you there." And then we started chatting when I got there, and he put a brush in my hand that had a nice little rubber tube around it so that I could grasp it with both hands because I don't have use of my fingers, a C7 incomplete as well as C6 complete. And he put it in my hand, and we started doing watercolors. And literally as soon as I put brush to paint to canvas, all of these colors and ideas and shapes and symbols started to flood out of my consciousness.

CROCKER 05:57

It was really an amazing thing. And I thought, "Whoa. Whoa. What just happened to me?" It was a rush, just a flood of ideas and sensations. And I literally just started painting. And he's like, "Are you sure you've never painted before?" And I said, "Nope. Nope. Nope. Give me another sheet of paper." And then I painted another one. And then half an hour later, we painted through a couple of different pages, and I was hooked. And the thing about Acquired Savant Syndrome is when you're diagnosed with it, the key aspect is compulsion to paint, not if you're good or not, but compulsion to paint. And I wanted to paint 24/7. That's all I wanted to do. And so the next day, I'm like, "Okay. Chris, let's go paint again." He said, "Well, Alder, your next scheduled about four days from now." And I said, "No. No. I want to do it now." And so I started sort of doodling with whatever I had on the side until our next session. Ended up having four sessions. And I developed a series of not great paintings, if you will, just on sheets of paper. And then I had mentioned that to family and friends that this was a pretty amazing thing that had happened. And somebody bought me a painting set. So when I came home 4 weeks later, a total of 10 weeks of Kessler, I came home, and there was an art set for me. And I literally the next day just started painting. And I've been painting ever since.

GANGA 07:21

I love that story. Thank you for sharing that. And how did art and painting help you during your rehabilitation journey?

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- CROCKER 07:29 Oh, my goodness, in an amazing way. And I have been a huge ambassador from a wellness standpoint for the last three and a half years, since the accident, it's almost been four, of advocating that to people for mental wellness, if you will, physical as well, but mostly mental from that standpoint, because for me, it relaxed me. It also helped me slowly get my muscle memory back and to move my arms in a way that I hadn't been able to really do so much in a more fluid fashion than when I was a Kessler. So I did a lot of weight training and a lot of that, but not in a very sort of melodious, if you will, or smooth and fluid movements with my arms, sort of like a ballet dancer. So when you are painting, you're moving your arms, but for me, both of them, because I could use one, my left hand, but I generally have to squeeze with my right hand to do my work. And I really just started doing different shapes and movements. And it was wonderful for me and very psychologically relaxing. And what that helped me do collectively was then approach the rest of my life in a very meticulous but very fluid way, as opposed to herky-jerky and getting overwhelmed by things. So after a while, I understood with painting that, well, if I made a mistake, I could paint right over it. That was the joy and the beauty of it. So I learned a lot through that, and I learned a lot intellectually and psychologically about how to approach different parts of my life, relationships, responsibilities, et cetera. when I got home through the process and joy of painting.
- GANGA 09:11 It's interesting that you bring up that painting trickled into other parts of your life, which is something I don't think people realize with different things that they do in their lives that they can learn from creating music, creating art, how it could also be used in other aspects of your life. So I like that point that you made. Going off of that, on your website you talk about the importance of listening to music when you paint. So I can imagine that might also help you mentally. Can you talk about the connection between the two mediums and what music you enjoy listening to when you do paint?
- CROCKER 09:52 Music is a giant part of my life now. It always has been, but it is much more so now. Every time that I pick up a paintbrush, I've got music in the background, and I'm almost 59 years old, but I feel like I'm 40, and I act like I'm 20. So I listen to a lot of music from my youth. I still love the Grateful Dead and the Rolling Stones, but I also like Bob Marley and the Almond Brothers and Led Zeppelin. But I listen also things like Carlos Santana, things with a melody and a beat. But I also love classical music as well as electro swing, things that have some tempo that are not slow, but that actually come to a crescendo at some point. Because for me, within painting, there's always that moment where you're like, "Oh, yes, I did that area really well." And then you basically want to celebrate that. And that's how music works for me is that there's always a celebratory portion of every song that they come to. And so listen to music really gets me into that very calm state of mind. And I call it getting my whoopi cat on. And I know that sounds a bit strange, but for me, getting my whoopi cat on is basically listening to music and then getting to that point where I'm listening, but I'm also dancing like nobody is watching. And I mention this because it is a very psychological and spiritual process I go through every single day.
- CROCKER 11:22 With a traumatic brain injury, you go through a lot of gymnastics mentally, psychologically as well. And there are some deep and dark thoughts that you have, some of despair and fear and even worse than that. And so people ask me, "Alder, how do you keep a smile on your face every day? How are you able to be in a good

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mood when you wake up every day and you're 85 or more percent paralyzed?" And I say, "Well, you know what? What keeps me from going down that hole is honestly, it's music. And music gets me into that place where I feel like I'm dancing like nobody's watching." Specifically what that is is a perfect state of mind where you literally feel like you're invincible. You're in your own cocoon. You are your absolute best self. You don't have anxiety. You don't have depression. You don't have suicidal thoughts. You don't worry about the world around you. And you're not really focusing on your own world as well. You're just there in the most peaceful, comfortable, calm, confident place you could possibly be. And music gets me in that state of mind, and I do that every single morning. It's what gets me out of bed, if you will. And it's what puts me in a good mood where I'm not lamenting sort of the downturn in my life, and I'm only looking at the upside of it. So music is the underlying current for me in everything that I do with the last blast on music being that it is the great mood changer and the mood equalizer. And for me, that's what infuses every single piece of my art.

GANGA 12:53

You described listening to music so beautifully. That was very nice. When creating a new piece or a series of pieces of art, where do you draw inspiration from? So you talked about your music. Is there anywhere else that you draw inspiration from, or is it simply the images come to you, and you translate what you see onto the canvas?

CROCKER 13:16

Great question, Jessica, a little bit of both. So when I whacked my head and I all of a sudden had this stream of consciousness, and then I really had the vivid color explosion, if you will, in my brain once Chris had put the brush in my hand. That literally happens to me every day. I wake up, and I have a series of images. I just literally wake up and ideas start pouring and colors start showing up and designs and ideas and symbols. And I basically have a couple of hundred within the first hour or so of waking up, and I try to follow some of those, but then they get basically imprinted on my mind and then stuck backwards in the subconscious. And then I go throughout the day, and then I bring those up as well as other things. So I could be looking at your shoes right now, and I would see the outline, and I would see the different colors in that and the contrast. And then as an example, your shoes would then take a certain shape, an abstract form, and then imprint itself on my brain. And then I would use that later. So I bring a lot of my favorite things. People would say, "What are you painting?"

CROCKER 14:24

I say, "Well, I don't really know how to paint so I'm just going to use what I think are cool things throughout my life, which are symbology, hieroglyphics, kind of archeology, ancient alphabets, strange things of that nature, but all things that have revolved around communications from our earliest origins." I think art is obviously one of the most tremendous ways to communicate feeling and substance and a lot of other things. And so when I get into my painting, I'm drawing symbols and designs, and I'm creating them fresh and new, and I'm taking them from, as an example, an imprint of your shoe or an outline of your foot. And then I will take that and I'll make it a little bit more abstract, and then I will add color to it, and then I will put that into one or a series of my paintings. So it really hops from one place to the other. And I'm never without visual ideas literally in front of me at all times during the daytime.

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- GANGA 15:21 And how would you describe your style of painting? If you had to define what you do as an artist, how would you explain it to somebody?
- CROCKER 15:31 I used to just say, "Well, I'm just flinging paint, and I hope that it hits the canvas." Because I did a lot of Pollock at the beginning because I wasn't quite sure how paint and colors work together. And now I use a paintbrush as well as squirt bottles. And in squirt bottles, it's basically like a ketchup or a mustard bottle, clear. And then I fill it with latex semi-gloss paint and then turn that upside down, and I squirt that, and that becomes my other brush, if you will. And so by doing that, using the squirt bottles and the paintbrush, I'm unable to literally draw a straight line. So the way that I describe my painting are abstract in its most abstract form or abstract expressionism. It's all under the auspices of contemporary fine art. But I'm really an abstract artist, and I paint things that I see either outside there in the physical world or that come from my brain. Most of it comes from my brain, and it comes from the subconscious. So when I'm painting, the idea comes out then, and I paint it, but it comes from something else that was built if that answers your question.
- GANGA 16:48 Yes, it does. Thank you so much. And your artwork is also very colorful, beautiful, vibrant. Is there a reason why you turn to colorful paintings or the colors that you choose?
- CROCKER 17:02 At the beginning, when I was painting, my friends and family and other just people that I would talk to said, "In art, many, many artists, they mind their souls for the pain and despair and the agony that they may have gone through, the suffering, the dark periods, and that infuses their art. Do you use that? Do you bring that up?" And I said, "Absolutely not. The last thing I want to do is to relive anything that I've gone through during that phase, during the accident, all of the dark side of all injuries and the dark side of all the thoughts that you get with it. I never want to see that again." And so the opposite of what I went through is a world of color. And my hope is that every one of my paintings makes somebody smile, brings a little joy into their life, and not makes them moody or brooding and think, "I wonder what he was thinking in." No. No. None of that. I'm generally in a very good mood after my music and my whoopi cat, if you will. And so I like to portray something that's joyful, more of a joyful visual adventure that I can take somebody on. And if you'll notice my work, it's fairly dense, and there's a lot going on. And the cool thing is that I paint from four different ways. So I paint on a flat surface. I can't paint on an easel. So I can't use a brush up and down, left and right because I don't have any triceps, and my arms get very tired. So I do it on a table, and I spin the canvas around. And so I literally paint four paintings within one whole painting, because I can only get to what I can in front of myself. I paint a lot of different designs and a lot of different stories within each area or each quadrant of the canvas. And I want each of those to try to tell its own story. When you take my paintings and you turn them 90 degrees and then another 90 and then another 90, you will, in fact, see four different paintings, and you will not see the same design in each sort of spin of the painting. And the color that you originally referenced, and I'm giving you a very long answer, about is what enables the painting to look different in every form and fashion.
- GANGA 19:21 That's really interesting.

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- CROCKER 19:23 Sorry, that was so long.
- GANGA 19:24 No. It's interesting to learn, in my opinion, how people approach what they create, especially with art, because upon looking at your art, it's very cohesive. Now when I go look back at your website and the art that you create, I'm going to turn my head and try and see what you described. So do you have any exciting projects you'd like to talk about?
- CROCKER 19:51 Yes. I'm very fortunate that by the time people will hear this interview, I will have had a show with myself and my friend who introduced me to Acquired Savantism, him being an Acquired Savant also. We're going to have a joint show in New Canaan at the Carriage Arts Barn for the first two weeks of April, and then I'm looking forward to a joint show in Las Vegas in June for about a couple of months. And then I hope to have a solo show in Vegas, probably in October or November at a place called TWO TWO Art, T-W-O-T-W-O Art. It's a new Gallery and company that is bringing awareness to, I guess you could say, extreme or alternate art.
- GANGA 20:39 Oh, that sounds awesome. Yeah. Thank you for sharing that. Do you have any features coming up?
- CROCKER 20:45 I do, actually. Just in brief, I'm very fortunate that a filmmaker from Norwalk, Connecticut, approached me a couple of months ago and said that he wanted to enter more festivals and show off his talent. And he wanted to do a passion project, and he had selected me as the content, if you will, as his subject matter. And I will be visiting him, and he'll be coming to my studio this weekend. And it should be about a seven or an eight minute documentary that will hopefully make the rounds of the film festivals starting, I would say, probably May or June. And that will also be used with and for a friend of mine who wants to essentially get my story out more to the news media from a wellness standpoint and an approach to life standpoint. So I'm very fortunate that people think that the way that I approach life and using art as my motivation and music as my background, if you will, to really get out there and make a difference. And that's really all I'm trying to do. At the end of the day, if I can help one person not have a bad day, then ultimately maybe this whole paralysis will be worthwhile, because it's difficult, and a lot of people are not having as great a result as I have had so far in being able to modify their emotions and feelings. And I do it utilizing art as my baseline, if you will. And so if I can help other people by promoting the fact that art really is a path towards wellness, well, then maybe this whole accident and everything that I've been through will be worth it.
- GANGA 22:30 That sounds great. And congratulations on being approached for the documentary. What piece of advice do you have for people that are maybe struggling to cope with their disability, whatever it may be, and want to find something to turn to that can help?
- CROCKER 22:52 If I may, I am going to answer it in two parts. The first is something that I learned at Kessler from the therapist who is there, not the art therapist, but a regular therapist. And I said to her, I said, "I get into a rut. I have sad feelings and sad days. I don't know how to get out of this." She gave me the best advice I've ever received anywhere, for anything, basically. And that was, "Remember these two words, Alder. This is what I tell a lot of people. Remember these two words, for now, F-O-R N-O-W. For now." I

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said, "What do you mean by that?" She said, "Because whatever it is that you're going through is temporal. You're going to get over it. It's only for now, either 5 minutes, 10 minutes, an hour, 2 hours, 5 hours. Whatever you're going through will end, and you'll be onto something new and different." And I've translated that into life is filled with back-to-back-to-back-to-back adventures, and you just need to know how to grab a hold of them and take advantage of them and try to make that adventure the best it could possibly be.

GANGA 23:55

I think that can be applied to anyone really is things are temporary in life, and there are different ways you can go about coping with a situation or handling a situation, and even just having a simple mantra like that can really help people. And we appreciate you taking the time out of your day to talk to us about your beautiful art. You said that you hope that it puts a smile on people's faces. I know that when I was looking at your art, I definitely had one on mine. So thank you again, Alder.

CROCKER 24:31

Thank you so much. It was absolutely my pleasure. And if I can give one last bump for Kessler, I don't know where I'd be without Kessler. I certainly don't think I would be painting. And there are certain things in my life and techniques that I use in my everyday life that Kessler Rehab absolutely helped me out on in ways that I'll never forget. And so my life was changed by Kessler, and my hope is that I can help Kessler change other people's lives as well. So I'm around and available if anybody ever needs me for anything.

BANKS-SMITH 25:09

For more information about Alder and his paintings, about the foundation, or to join his study, links are in the program notes. Tuned into our podcast series lately? Join our listeners in 90 countries who enjoy learning about the work of Kessler Foundation. Be sure and subscribe to our SoundCloud channel, Kessler Foundation, for more research updates. Follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Listen to us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, SoundCloud, or wherever you get your podcast. This podcast was recorded on Thursday, March 10th, 2022 remotely and was edited and produced by me, Joan Bank Smith, Creative Producer for Kessler Foundation.