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LIFE

Former Marine finds hope through art

Erica Hobbs Special to The Detroit News

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Artist Matthew "Mattie" Armstrong had just turned 20 when he fought in the Battle of Khafji, one of the bloodiest of the Gulf War. Heavy air attacks from the allied Coalition against the Iraqis marked the event, in what Armstrong described as a complete destruction, leaving a wake of carnage.

The Harper Woods resident served as an artillery scout for the U.S. Marine Corps and had been trained to be callous. But seeing the trail of young, bloated bodies brought on feelings of connection and guilt he wasn't expecting.

"Before, they were faceless, they were the enemy," he said. "I didn't realize that these were men my age, these boys were my age... and they were dead, all of them, and they didn't have a chance."

Following the war, Armstrong would serve another few years in the Marine Corps before returning home, but the wounds from his service refused to heal. In addition to permanent lung damage from Operation Desert Storm, Armstrong suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental health condition that's caused by witnessing a traumatic event or an experience.

He battled guilt, sometimes wondering if he was a mass murderer for what had happened. He found himself irrationally angry and struggled to connect with friends and family, blaming others for his problems, and then self-isolating.

“I didn’t have the ability to say, ‘This bothers me, and I’m going to tell you why,’” he said. “I would more have the ability to say, ‘You’re doing me wrong, you’re dead to me,’ and I would cut (them) off.”

Armstrong found solace in the bottle and became an alcoholic. After returning from service, he enrolled in art school at Wayne State University — with a focus on painting — and took a job at a bar in Detroit. But partying and the lucrative nature of the job caused him to miss too many classes, and he failed to graduate. Instead, he became the bar's manager — a position he held for 20 years — which exacerbated his alcoholism.

He also continued to paint, but after spending months working on a piece, he sold it for pennies.

Things changed in 2015. After complaining about pain in his side, Armstrong's doctor told him alcoholism had damaged his liver and that he was dying and should get his affairs in order. The visit was a wake-up call, and Armstrong decided to fight for his life.

He began weaning himself from his alcohol addiction during the subsequent few months, noticing not only a reduction in physical ailments but an increasing clarity of mind and purpose. He was directionless and realized how unhappy and unfilled he was.

“I started seeing things clearer again,” he said. “The fog was gone.”

Through his newfound clarity, Armstrong found gratitude and forgave himself, deciding to focus on kindness to himself and kindness to others.

He left his job at the bar and started work at Trader Joe's grocery store, an environment of positivity he found fun and rewarding. His painting changed, too, and he found himself with more focused, more positive ideas and a transition away from the abstract.

"Rather than (putting) all this emotion of PTSD, anger and resentment (into my art)... I wanted to put more kindness into it," he said. "If anything, that's what I want to be known before."

Armstrong's life changed again in 2020. In February, he met art agent Nicole George, who put him on a path to becoming a professional artist. She taught him the true value of his work — more than 10 times as much as he had been selling it for in the past — which he said was reflective of his changing self-image.

His artworks now range from $2,500-$5,000 a piece, he said. He also sells prints for $175.

"Undervaluing myself was part of who I was back then," he said. "I undervalued myself as a human, I didn't see my worth."

When the pandemic hit, his war-time lung damage prevented him from working his grocery store job, and his PTSD worsened in isolation. But instead of reaching for a drink, he threw himself into his art and began to bloom.

Armstrong's work is distinct for its bright colors, thick brush strokes and use of smaller shapes — like squares and circles — to make up a larger image, inspired by breaking down the grid of a canvas. While his earlier works were more abstract, his current style depicts clear images, often containing a subtle socially conscious message within.

His painting of a rhinoceros portrays the animal with tiny, eye-like circles in its mid-section, hidden amongst a multitude of shapes. Paired with its detached horns, it depicts the horrors of poaching. A seemingly cheerful image of a jellyfish is full of tiny shapes representing plastic in the ocean and the proliferation of plastic in the world in general.

Much of his work depicts iconic images of Detroit, including the Fisher Building, Belle Isle, Campus Martius and one of the city's famed pheasants.

"I left, and I've been all over the world, and Detroit is truly family," said Armstrong, who lived in the city for 20 years before recently moving to Harper Woods. "Detroit is home for me. There's something different about Detroit and Detroit people and how we collectively bond over things that are hard."

Fellow artist and friend Brian Pollock said Armstrong's work has an undeniable spirit with depth below a surface of whimsy.

"There's a vulnerable truth that exists that's authentic in every single one of his paintings, there's a story inside each one," he said. "All of those lines, if you follow them, they will show themselves. Every single stroke of that brush is intentional, like him as a human being."

Christa Chamberlain and her husband Shaun are long-term friends and fans of Armstrong. They own two of his works, including "The Cloud," a large, orange abstract painting displayed prominently over their fireplace, as well as non-abstract work, "The Crucifix."

For her, the bright colors bring her joy, and knowing Armstrong's background and his kind and giving nature makes the paintings more special.

“We fell in love with those two pieces,” she said. “They had a history and a story, they’re part of him, and they’re absolutely stunning.”

Reflecting on his time in the Marine Corps, Armstrong said he loves his country and is proud of his service. He said he cherishes his bonds with fellow veterans and finds the community empowering, but said there is a huge need for their continued support, especially those who also struggle with PTSD.

He hopes his story is an example to others and evidence that healing is possible and that veterans will recognize that their lives do matter and are worth fighting for.

“All these veterans feel they’re alone, they feel like there’s no other way, and there are other ways,” he said. “There are people for all of us, there is care. You have to fight for yourself, and if you’re not going to fight yourself, there are people that will fight of you, and I’m one of them.”