



## **Doug Landis “Mouth Art”**

Doug Landis was a regular high school student until one day when he received a spinal cord injury during a wrestling match. He was paralyzed from the neck down. But that didn't stop Doug from achieving his best in life and living it to the fullest. Doug worked hard and kept hopeful. He found a new passion- acrylic and watercolour painting- and he became good at it! Today, Doug is a well respected artist with his most popular wildlife series, “Vanishing Breeds” having been exhibited in Washington, Los Angeles, Las Vegas, St. Louis, and Brussels, Belgium. Doug was kind enough to share his artwork with us- and it is truly astonishing. He also provided us with an interview showing us how a positive outlook and persevering attitude can bring out the best in us and lead us to success and happiness

### **Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?**

Growing up in California I was very active and I loved the outdoors. I played a lot of sports, as much for the fun of playing as for the competition. My father was transferred to St. Louis, Missouri when I was in junior high. A year later, in 1975, I joined the high school wrestling team. During a match, I made a bad move by mistake, I had been taught not to do it, but I made a mistake. The mistake allowed my opponent to grab my head. I realized I made the bad move and tried to pull away and my opponent held on. This dislocated my neck, leaving me paralyzed from the neck down. I've never blamed my opponent. I would have done the same thing. I spent two months in a critical care unit and six months in rehab. As soon as I was out of critical care, my parents started having tutors come to my hospital room so I wouldn't fall behind in my classes. After rehab, I went back to my high school and graduated with my class. I went on to college and received an Associate of Arts degree in Communication, then a Bachelor of Arts in Media Studies-TV & Video Production. I taught as an assistant teacher in television production and operated the local access video station for the college and cable TV company for a semester. I then went on to Graduate School and earned a Masters of Fine Arts degree in Motion Graphics-Computer, Video & Film Animation. After graduation I worked as a freelance computer graphic arts for awhile, but then, I was laid off. I couldn't find work because everyone saw my wheelchair and my disability first and couldn't see me and what I could accomplish. I had been drawing by mouth since I left rehab, but didn't take it seriously. I started going to fine art shows and selling my work online and at a few galleries. We did this for several years, but never made a lot of money. Six years ago I started working for a local Independent Living Center that worked with the local disabled community. I worked as a caseworker, an Information & Referral specialist and Peer Consultant. I later became the Director of Peer Consulting Services. My duties included going to the three local rehab hospitals and provided Peer support and spinal cord injury information to the newly injured patients. I also started a disabled men's support group and over saw a group of volunteer disabled Peer Consultants who worked with other people living with various disabilities providing Peer support. A little over three years ago I was accepted into an outstanding organization called the Mouth & Foot Painting Artists Association, ([www.mfpausa.com](http://www.mfpausa.com)). Before this I had created most of my work in pencil, ink, pastels and only a little painting. I'm now learning how to paint with acrylic and water color paints. This past winter I was pushed out of my job, so now I'm happily working full time painting for MFPA

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and loving every minute of it. They are a wonderfully supportive organization for disabled artists like me.

**How did you inspire yourself not to give up even when things took a turn for the worse?**

I am very lucky that I have a close supportive family and friends who were there for me during the dark times. Over the years I've seen a lot of families and relationships fall apart after a catastrophic injury like mine. Like most newly injured people, I did go through some depression after my injury. During rehab, I had seen others use drugs and alcohol to cope with their new reality, it was very tempting to follow this same path. I had also seen how it destroyed some lives and I even saw one individual try to will himself to death. Being a very active, athletic person growing up, my spiritual beliefs and the way I was raised by my parents, all these factors helped me cope with those dark times.

**"We all face challenges in our lives...I've met many people worse off than I am. I feel blessed with my life. It could have turned out a lot worse. I believe we all have hidden talents within ourselves. These talents helps us overcome these challenges, they give us strengths and freedom in many ways."**

**How did you learn to draw by mouth?**

In rehab, I learned to use a mouthstick to turn pages in a book, type on a typewriter, operate a TV remote and a telephone. After rehab, my brother thought I was spending too much time watching TV and bet me to a drawing contest. He put a pen in the end of my mouthstick and I started drawing...I won the contest. My mother had some art books around the house. She showed me this book of a Spanish artist and how he used a real sketchy pen & ink style to draw the twelve apostles. I copied the style and found I could also draw similar faces. We then received a Christmas card of a sketchy line drawing of a house. I copied the style and soon started creating my own note stationary and with the help of family and friends I started selling them at local arts & crafts shows. I unfortunately only looked at my drawing as a hobby and didn't take it seriously for many years. That's why most all of my schooling was in TV, video production, animation and computer graphics. I wanted to be a film director or computer animator. Even though I was drawing by mouth and going to arts & craft shows, I never thought of myself as an artist. It wasn't until I finished grad school and was laid off from my first real job as a computer graphic artist and couldn't find work. After not drawing for a few years, I started drawing again and going to a few arts & crafts shows.

I injured my neck drawing too much and had to stop drawing and go through rehab on my neck and had one doctor tell me I wouldn't be able to draw ever again...I went to another doctor. At this time I started drawing in pencil because it was easier then drawing in pen. I created a couple of wildlife images and they were much different than the kind of work I was creating in the past. I was drawing an eagle one day and my wife said, "Stop there that's beautiful, that's your style". I realized then I had a gift and I really needed to explore this gift. I started taking my work more seriously. I started going to Fine Art shows and even won several Best of Show awards beating out all the non-disabled artists at the shows. This was in the 1990's, by 2001 I wasn't making enough money drawing and had to find a job to pay the bills. That's when I was hired on with the disabled organization.

But working full time left no time to draw and I didn't draw anything for several years...this drove me crazy. A few years back, while working I ran across information I had on the MFPA organization. With encouragement from family I decided to see if they would accept me. I had met one of their mouth artists many years before, Brom Wikstrom and he encouraged me to join. I created some paintings and sent some pieces in and they accepted me. I was very excited. I've been making the time to paint and learning to paint now for almost four years. Since being pushed out of my previous employer, I've been working full time painting and challenging myself to do better with each new painting I create.

**Do tell us about your series - Vanishing Breeds.**

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Vanishing Breeds started out right when I was switching from drawing with ball point pen, felt tip pen and pen & ink to using art pencils. During the previous years I had created a few animal images using a brush and ink style, but nothing like when I switched to art pencils. Art pencils come in different hardness and softness graphites. So you can create charcoal black lines to very light gray shading depending how hard or soft the graphite is. I've always loved the outdoors, watching all the nature shows on TV and visiting the zoos in our area and when I started drawing with these art pencils, the first thing that emerged was that bald eagle. I then drew a tiger and a Florida gray panther and realized the animals I was creating were on the endangered species list. I decided by creating these images and showing my work and selling a few prints, that I hope in one small way, helps shine a light on the beauty of these great animals and what a loss it would be if a single one of these precious species vanishes.

**You have painted numerous sketches. How do you manage to cover such a broad spectrum of topics?**

I'm inspired by a great many things, the animals I see, a single flower, other artists works...the list is long. I'll see something like a flower and then maybe a piece of art by another artist of a flower, an image forms in my mind, sometimes at night when I can't sleep and then I want to create that image. I have a lot of ideas in my head, I'll probably never create them all, but I'm going to try.

**Media studies, Motion Graphics and now Fine Arts... Were you always artistically inclined?**

I guess so. The problem was, before my injury, I was a very active boy. My mother says I never sat down long enough to find out. I did love creating and building things with my hands and I've always had a very creative mind, daydreaming and making up stories. I guess that's why I thought of becoming a director.

**What is your typical working day like?**

My wife gets me ready in the morning. I have a van with a lift so we can go shopping together. After lunch, she'll set me up to paint and I'll paint for 1-4 hours a day. I don't paint every day and I'll take a break after two hours to stretch my neck so I don't strain my neck. We go out with family and friends some nights and many other nights my wife Brooke and I like to stay home watching TV, a movie and spending time together.

**What is your message to today's youth?**

We all face challenges in our lives, some people face far worse challenges than others. I've read and met many people worse off than I am. I feel blessed with my life. It could have turned out a lot worse. I believe we all have hidden talents within ourselves. These talents help us overcome these challenges, they give us strengths and freedom in many ways. We should keep trying new things, even things we may not like at first, you never know until you've tried. I would have never found my passion for creating art if I didn't try. I didn't even take my art seriously until I tried several other paths in my life. I'm lucky enough to have found a path with the help of my wife, family, friends and the support MFPA...A path that gives me freedom and peace. I hope everyone can find that in their lives.

**Tell us about the support you got from your family.**

I have a great family. They continue to give me unconditional love and support. My mother was a registered nurse and this came in very handy after my injury. I had some friends who didn't know how to handle my injury and dropped away, while others stepped in and they were there for me. When I met my wife, she and her family accepted me for me and didn't see my disability as an issue. There were a great many people at my high school and in the community, many I had never met, who donated money to help buy my first accessible van and other medical needs. This fund was turned into a small charity called Missouri KIDS. They continue to help other local student athletes who become injured with a spinal cord injury. Without each of these big and little acts of kindness and support, I wouldn't have this blessed life.

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