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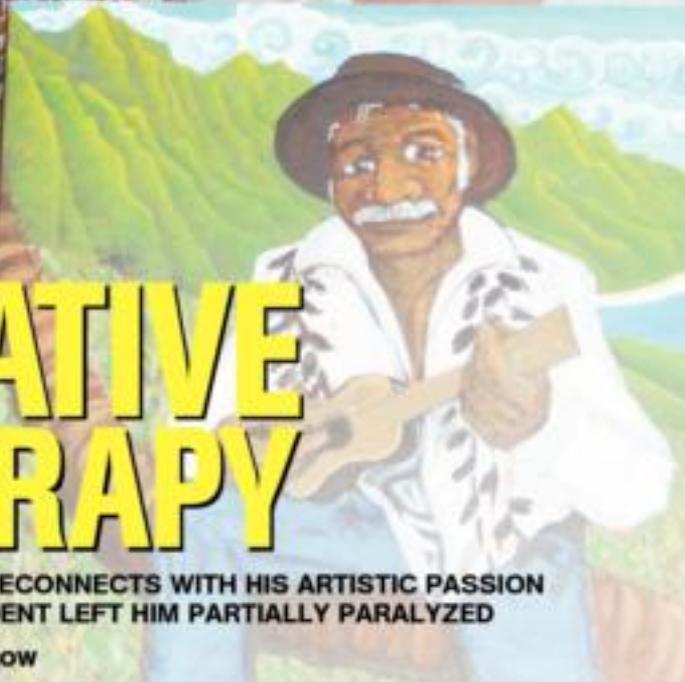
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CREATIVE THERAPY

MOSES HAMILTON RECONNECTS WITH HIS ARTISTIC PASSION AFTER A 2002 ACCIDENT LEFT HIM PARTIALLY PARALYZED

PHOTO BY JOAN CONROW

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Artist focuses on life after accident

Moses Hamilton reconnects with his passion for art

By Joan Conrow
Kaua'i People

Moses "Mo" Hamilton has discovered that "art soothes the soul."

And his soul needed some soothing after a car crash six years ago left him confined to a wheelchair, with no use of his legs and minimal use of one arm.

"It was kind of ironic that after my wreck, I was taken away from a lot, but I was also reconnected to my art," says Hamilton, who will be having a showing of his work on July 5 in Hanalei. "Art's been my savior. It makes my life possible. It's so wild what life does, and where it leads you."

Hamilton, 32, says he used to draw, doodle and sketch as a child, but never really made the time to develop his talent. A tall, good-looking guy and self-described risk-taker, he was too busy having fun, working and getting by on his considerable charm.

"I was in a serious Peter Pan complex," he says. "I didn't want to grow up and become an adult. Life gave me a slap-down and said, 'now it's time.'"

The "slap-down" occurred on the night of Oct. 18, 2002, when Hamilton was driving home from work and wrecked his car. He was airlifted to O`ahu and spent six months in the hospital on morphine, "physically weak and exhausted by trying to survive," he recalls.

"They told me I would never breathe on my own, I'd have no movement and be stuck in a room on a ventilator for life," he says. "That was the prognosis they gave me."

Hamilton had other ideas. "Nobody's going to save you but yourself," he says.

First he regained his speech - "that was terrifying, not being able to talk" - then his ability to breathe on his own. Meanwhile, he experienced a "little wiggle" of movement and ultimately was able to move his right arm enough to operate a wheelchair and pet a dog on his lap.

"Every inch of independence or movement in your life is huge," he says. "If I can feel a pinprick more on my body, it's a big deal."

He eventually was able to go to the Rehabilitation Hospital of the Pacific, where he encountered some mouth painters who he found "pretty inspiring." Still, his own first efforts at painting were discouraging, as he had little strength or control over the brush.

Once he returned home to Kaua`i, however, things changed. His wheelchair became his body, his family often functions as his hands and Hamilton began spending more time

painting, exploring both the new mediums of watercolors and oils and his many, often conflicted, emotions about his experience.

"To deal with my situation, I've had to become a deeper and more enlightened person," he says. "In some ways it might have made me a richer, stronger person. Now I can't hide from myself. I can't run. I'd rather deal with things."

That deepened sensitivity finds its way into his art, where Hawai'i's landscapes and faces — nothing makes him happier than to hear someone say, "That looks like uncle!" — serve as muse.

"I'm a feeling artist," he says. "What I want to portray is feeling. I'm about expression and color. There's so much emotion in color."

"Art fulfills your expression," he continues. "It's like your children, coming out at you. It's like your magic brush is making life possible."

The very act of painting has also contributed to Hamilton's more thoughtful approach to life. "It's like meditation," he explains. "You may fret about the painting, but it takes me away from my wheelchair and puts me into the moment."

It isn't, however, always easy to get into that moment. Hamilton depends heavily on his family for assistance, such as stretching the canvas, adjusting lights, setting up his paints and moving the brush in and out of his mouth.

The brush is inserted into a flat plastic plate that rests on his tongue. It can't turn, like a wrist, so his range of motion is restricted. That also currently limits the size canvas he can work on — "just wait till I get my forklift!" he enthuses — and sometimes requires him to paint with the canvas upside down.

"You have to constantly adapt, it's a challenge," he says. "But challenge is good."

Notes his mother, Cherry: "He gets the ideas and we have to be his hands."

"I have to be patient," acknowledges Hamilton, who also organizes his brother to cook according to his recipes and instructions. "It's all about letting go of time, desire, of wanting and ego," he says. "That's what I've had to do."

At some point he'd like to put his own experiences to good use as a promotional speaker. "I think I could help people who are not having it so easy see the glory in every moment," says Hamilton, who gets strength by thinking of all the children struggling to simply survive. "How can I be weak? It would be a betrayal of them."

His primary interest, however, is continuing to refine his painting.

"Art is about passion, and I have that passion now," he says. "The fire has been relit and the more breath I give it, the more it grows. There's magic all around us in this world. It's called life."