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BRAIN-INJURED ARTISTS SHOW LIFE'S REFLECTIONS



Sandra Madden of Douglas shows her color photo "Native Child." She took the picture on a visit to Plimoth Plantation. (T&G Staff Photos/CHRISTINE PETERSON)

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"Winter Calm" by Sandra Madden shows a field in the Blackstone Valley.

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It's a simple scene: a baby nestled inside a pouch around his mother's belly, sleeping.

His eyes are softly closed, his head leaning against his mother.

It's a scene of calm, of tranquility, captured through Sandra Madden's camera lens. That feeling of peace is what Ms. Madden loves about the photo. That feeling of peace is something she was missing for a while after a bicycle accident nearly five years ago changed her life.

She was riding her bicycle near her home in Douglas when she lost control for a second. She fell off the bike and onto her back.

In the months that followed, she noticed alarming lapses in her memory. She would go shopping at Target, but when she left the store, she would look out on the vast parking lot and have no idea where she parked her car. When she visited a doctor's office for the fourth time, she had no recollection of the first three visits.

Eighteen months after her bicycle accident, Ms. Madden was diagnosed with post concussive syndrome. Her head was injured despite her attempt to stay safe by wearing a helmet.

Ms. Madden, a former writer at an investment company, has made strides in her recovery. Volunteer work at the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts has helped her regain confidence and feel ready to go back to work.

Of course, she also feels better when she's looking through the viewfinder of her Nikon D80. Before and after her brain injury, her photography, her art, has been her constant.

"I just feel good," she said of why she takes photos. "I'm attracted to children, to the landscape. I just love nature."

Ms. Madden was one of 30 artists who donated artwork for a silent auction to raise money for the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, a private nonprofit that supports brain injury survivors and their families. The artwork — including photographs, paintings, sculptures and jewelry — was on display at the association's annual conference on Thursday at the Best Western Royal Plaza Hotel & Trade Center in Marlboro.

One of Ms. Madden's photos, called "Winter Calm," is a serene portrait of winter in the Blackstone Valley. In sepia tones, it shows a band of white clouds behind a crop of tall black trees in a gently rolling, snow-covered field.

Her favorite piece, though, is "Native Child," the photo of the sleeping boy. She saw the child and his family on a recent visit to the Wampanoag village at Plimoth Plantation. "I was drawn to his face," she said.

Suzanne Doswell knows well the power of making art, especially for people who have endured brain injuries. The Pittsfield resident was in a serious car crash in 1992, which left her with a broken leg, broken arm, broken jaw and broken back.

But she had another serious injury that could not be seen and could not be bandaged. It was four years before a doctor determined she had a diffuse axonal injury — a serious all-over brain injury.

In the years before she was diagnosed and started rehabilitation, she couldn't find her balance or remember things she should have remembered. For about six months after her accident, the longtime artist and art teacher didn't know what to do with her paints and brushes.

"I didn't even recognize what they were," said Ms. Doswell, a former boarding school administrator. Her children, 9 and 11 at the time, helped her relearn her favorite pastime.

A traumatic brain injury, such as Ms. Doswell's, is the result of a blow or jolt to the head, which causes the brain to move rapidly in the skull. Symptoms range from headaches and speech problems to agitation and anxiety. Every year, 1.7 million people in the United States sustain a traumatic brain injury and 52,000 die, according to the Brain Injury Association of America.

Because they're invisible, brain injuries often go undiagnosed.

"Medical professionals need to be more educated about brain injuries," said Pamela M. Bush, communications director for the state Brain Injury Association.

Ms. Doswell, western regional manager of the state association, now teaches art to people who have suffered brain injuries. "It can be an opportunity for people to reflect peacefully on what's going on...to rebuild things they've lost," she said.

Ms. Doswell still has trouble with balance, sleep and fatigue, but she said art brought her back to her grounded place.

"I'm most happy when I'm doing art," she said.

One of her paintings for auction at the Brain Injury Association's conference last week was an abstract design of blues and grays. Another was a portrait of a vivid pink rose.

Not all of the artwork on display at the conference was two-dimensional; there was also woodwork by Robert Erickson of Shrewsbury. He made and donated a two-sided cutting board for the fundraiser auction.

"I don't do anything for decorations, I make something that you use and enjoy," said Mr. Erickson, who works as a carpenter.

More than a decade ago, he fell off a ladder while working on a roof in Marlboro. He was in a coma for three days, and when he woke up he had lost his short-term memory.

"When I realized it, I didn't want to tell anybody," he said. "But now I think, this is me, I have a head injury. Either you like me or you don't."

These days, Mr. Erickson works full time, but he still has trouble with memory and fatigue. He also has aphasia, meaning that when he sees printed words, sometimes he can't verbalize them.

Mr. Erickson believes everyone needs an outlet to get through a traumatic injury. For him, it was wood and carving tools. For Ms. Madden it was photography; for Ms. Doswell, painting.

"It depends what pleases you," Mr. Erickson said, "what you enjoy."