

COMMON GROUND

FALL 2013

IN THE JUNIATA RIVER VALLEY

*Start of our
25th year!*

*The Artistry of
Michael Platzer*

**The Barber Of Valley Street
Wild Billies & Other Goat Tales
Coach Kevin Kodish • Growing Up In 'Orby**

NEWSSTAND PRICE

\$5.00



'Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.' —Theodore Roosevelt

Meet the Artist

Bring up just about any subject in a conversation with him, and there's a good chance that Michael Platzer knows something about it. In addition to his passion for painting, Michael has a variety of interests, which makes him a great conversationalist.

Here are a few of his favorite things:

PASTIMES: painting, creating art, computing

AUTHORS: Stephen King, H. G. Wells, Dean Koontz

BOOKS: *The Talisman*, *The Stand* by Stephen King; *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque

MUSICIANS: Pink Floyd, The Beatles

SONGS: *Bohemian Rhapsody* (Queen), *Life's Been Good* (Joe Walsh), *Blinded by the Light* (Manfred Mann's Earth Band), *The Division Bell*, *Time* (Pink Floyd), *Norwegian Wood*, *While my Guitar Gently Weeps*, *In My Life* (The Beatles)

MOVIES: *Apocalypse Now*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Doctor Zhivago*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*

TV SHOWS: *Mash*, *Seinfeld*, *Big Bang Theory*, *X-Files*

SPORTS TEAMS: Philadelphia Eagles; Penn State Nittany Lions football

MAGAZINE: *Common Ground*, of course!

FOODS: Turkey, chili, veggie sub, pizza

Sharing the Art in his Heart

BY Pam Brumbaugh

Michael Platzer's studio is in itself a canvas. The dark rose painted walls form a perfect background for displaying a variety of his paintings that show the scope of his subjects. The sliding glass doors, at one end, let in natural light, plus inspiration from birds or wildlife that enter the artist's backyard.

A hanging easel, a wall-mounted digital display, and work table are situated in a corner between the glass doors and a fireplace. A computer work station, and shelves which hold a stereo, CDs, and art books, line the opposite wall.

The large rectangular room is divided almost in half by a large-screen TV, mounted from the ceiling. In the back half, along the same wall as the fireplace, an adjustable bed is positioned beneath a ceiling-mounted track for the lift that is used to get him in and out of the bed.

Michael not only creates his art in this room. He sleeps here, too. The studio not only illustrates Michael's success as an artist. It portrays the determination, patience and perseverance of the man who wields the paint brush.



In late May 1975, Michael was looking forward to participating in his school's upcoming field day. The active 12-year-old's favorite activities included gymnastics and playing ball. On weekends, he loved riding his motorcycle, and enjoyed hauling his three-year-old nephew Christopher Burke behind him, as he drove around the yard.

On the fateful day of the accident, Michael went swimming with his older brother Larry. They took Chris along, too.

"I dove into an above-ground pool, hitting my head on the bottom," Michael remembers. "Larry and a friend, Rich Watson, lifted me out of the water and laid me by the side of the pool. I was conscious the whole time."

He immediately knew that something was terribly wrong. "I couldn't move or

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Photo at top: Michael in his home studio. The quote is one of his favorites, and one that he chooses to live by.



Michael enjoys listening to music CDs and audio books while he paints. He spends hours at a time with a paint brush in his mouth. "My jaws are extremely strong," he says with a smile.

For better control and a lighter touch, his brother-in-law Alan Shultz covers his paint brush handles with plastic tubing. He also coats Michael's finished art with an acrylic spray, and frames his paintings.

A carpenter by trade, Alan custom-made Michael's easel and constructed the fireplace in his studio.

'I love to paint. When I'm painting, I don't feel handicapped.'
—Michael Platzer

Look for the dog. There is a dog in many of his paintings, sometimes semi-hidden in the background. It is Michael's way of honoring the memory of his golden retriever, Brittany. She was a puppy when he got her, a gift from his sister and brother-in-law, Dorothy and Stephen Burke, when their dog Brandy had puppies.

Though not trained as a helper dog, Brittany was Michael's constant companion and best friend from 1988 to 2005. "If I wheeled out to the kitchen to get a drink of water, she went with me," he says. "I used to tell people that Brittany thinks its time for her to take me for a walk, to blow the stink off," he laughs.



"The Wolf" was Michael's first piece after he began studying art, at age 15, under the guidance of Larry Groninger.

*"Michael's father and I were buddies since high school, so I knew Mike since he was a toddler.
"I started him out painting with water-colors. At the time, he painted with a device in his hand, which could hold a spoon, and we converted it to hold a paint brush.
"He was very easy to work with. He was eager to learn, and picked up on things easily.
"I can't imagine the perseverance he has."
—Larry Groninger
Lewistown
Michael's art teacher*

feel my body. I remember laying there, looking at my hand and not knowing why I couldn't move it."

His neck was broken at vertebrates C4 and C5, causing irreversible damage to his spinal cord. "I'm paralyzed from the chest down, with some movement in my arms but I can't move my hands or fingers."

He spent the next six weeks at Harrisburg General Hospital. Part of that time, he lay immobilized on a Stryker frame. Following that, he endured five months of rehabilitation therapy at Polyclinic Hospital in Harrisburg.

It was a long, difficult journey home, and returning as a quadriplegic meant that nothing would ever be the same again.

Michael returned to school for 8th and 9th grades, but missed a lot, due to hospital stays and therapy sessions. "I was more susceptible to catching colds and flu," he says. He was home schooled for the remainder of his high school years.

Once simple tasks were now extremely hard or impossible. He tried to write using a device attached to his hand. "Mike Goodling made it for me in OC [occupational therapy]. I couldn't write so I thought I'd try drawing.

"Even before the accident, I loved to draw," Michael says. "I remember in 6th grade our art teacher Ron Shirk took us outside where we paired up with a partner and drew one another....They weren't very good drawings but it was fun!"

The device enabled him to draw, but he admits it was a struggle. Still, he kept trying. And he slowly became much better at it.



When Michael was 15, he told his family that he wanted to get serious about art. "My mother suggested that we ask Larry Groninger, a friend of our family, to try to teach me a few things," Michael recalls. Groninger earned his Master's in Fine Art at Temple University. A former art teacher, he co-owned Mifflin County Printing, and is a professional artist.

"Larry came to the house once a week for over a year." Michael recalls that he looked forward to his teacher's visits. "He taught me perspective, shading, color mixing...some of the basics in art," he credits. "I thank Larry every chance I get for kick-starting my journey into the wonderful world of art.

"I enjoy painting anything and everything," Michael says. The paintings on display throughout the house prove his statement. Subjects range from portraits to lighthouses, mountain scenes to city streets,



INTO THE WILD ©2008



MY CHRISTMAS STORY ©2010



COURTSHIP ©2009



LAKE CABIN ©2010



COMING HOME ©2009

The movie "Christmas Story" inspired Michael to paint MY CHRISTMAS STORY (top left). "I put a tree in the window instead of the leg lamp," he laughs.

COURTSHIP (top right) is a portrait of his great-grandparents, George and Anna Platzer, who were part of his childhood. Michael painted their portrait from a vintage photo of them. "Pap died in his mid-90's. Gram died five or six years later at age 98."

SLED RIDE SURPRISE came from his childhood memories of sled riding at Browns' Farm at the lower end of Ferguson Valley. "They had horses in a corral and a dog—but it wasn't a golden retriever," he says. The dog in his painting looks like his former pal Brittany.



Michael's art is displayed throughout the home he shares with his sister and brother-in-law, Sally-Jo and Alan Shultz.



SLED RIDE SURPRISE ©2011



CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA FALL ©2010



PORTLAND HEAD MORNING ©2010



CHRISTMAS MAGIC ©2010



CASE'S POND ©2010

from wildlife to fantasy, and beyond.

During one of his hospital stays, Michael noticed a painting on a wall. He was intrigued when told it was by Joni Eareckson, a quadriplegic who paints with her mouth.

Later, he had an epiphany of sorts when he recalled that information in a moment of intense frustration. "I was trying to paint a covered bridge and was struggling with the top edge of the roof. So I leaned down and grabbed the brush handle with my mouth. I discovered I had much more control using my mouth.... and the rest, as they say, is history!"

People are amazed how he can capture so much detail in his art.

"They tell me, 'I can't even draw a straight line with my hands!' and I reply, 'Don't feel bad, I can't either!'" Michael laughs.

Though he has no control over his hands, he wears custom-made braces to support his wrists and fingers. About every two years, Michael orders new ones, two pair at a time. At first, they were ordered from a medical supply company, but were expensive, and delivery took months. So his family found a local supplier. "The same Amish man in Big Valley has been making them for about 30 years now," Michael says.

In the summer of 1988, Michael took a course on oils and watercolors at Penn State. "That course helped refine my art," he credits. Plus, the class gave him more exposure. He has shown his work at Penn State and was invited to demonstrate as a Visiting Artist.

He goes to art festivals and shows, but most of his work is commissioned. "People give me a photograph to work from, or just describe a scene to me," Michael says.

It usually takes him one to two weeks to complete a painting. He first does a rough sketch with a brush. "That only takes a couple of hours," he says. "Though for portraits, I draw it first in much more detail."



The youngest of six siblings, Michael shares a home with his sister and brother-in-law, Sally-Jo and Alan Shultz. It is the same house where he lived with his mother, Mary Platzer, until she died in 2005.

His other sister and brother-in-law, Dorothy and Stephen Burke, built a house next door, designed to be Michael-friendly. He likes to hang out by their swimming pool on hot summer days, watching the kids swim, and where he can cool off under a misting system installed under an eave of the pool house.

Brothers and sisters-in-law, Allan and Deborah Platzer, Larry and Carol Platzer, and

*'Art is in the heart,
art is in the mind,
not in the hand.'*

—Michael Platzer



Michael has had a computer since 1990, and is as proficient with a mouth-held stylus on a computer keyboard as he is with a paintbrush on canvas. He works on commission as a graphic artist and web designer for local businesses. His website, www.mouthpainter.com, has videos of him painting. You can also connect with Michael on Facebook.

The photos on the wall show paintings, which will be published on greeting cards by the Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists. Three more photos have been added to the display since this one was taken. He got the idea for displaying the photos from Pinterest, a social media website.

Brenda Fye, live in Lewistown. (Bill Fye, the oldest brother, died in a tragic house fire this past February.)

Michael's father, Albert Platzer, lives in Ferguson Valley and comes by often.

"I'm lucky to have a large family who cares about me. "If not for the support of my family and friends, I never could've painted," he credits. "They have always been supportive and positive."

It's probably a toss-up of whether Michael inherited his family's positive attitude, or if they acquired it from him. "If it wasn't for my ability to paint, and my sense of humor, I probably would've gone insane years ago," he admits.

Michael receives excellent personal care from his sister Sally-Jo, and three part-time caregivers. According to statistics on the disabled, he is well-above average in health wellness and quality of life. "I turned 50 last fall, but I tell everyone I'm

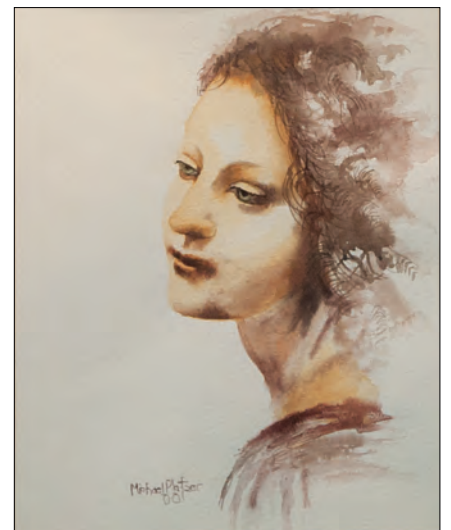
120 in handicapped years," he jokes. He appreciates his close relationship with Dr. Jose Acosta, who has been his primary physician since 1982, when he first opened his practice in Lewistown.



Since he joined the Association of Mouth and Foot Painting Artists in 2009, Michael's art career has soared. An international for-profit association, the MFPA is owned and run by artists who paint with the brush held in their mouth or feet, due to a disability that prevents them from using their hands.

He first learned of the MFPA from an artist friend, while demonstrating at an arts festival. "Thiery Olbrich came up to me and says, 'I buy Christmas cards from the Mouth and Foot Painting Artists. Why don't they sell your cards?'"

Michael found their website and wrote to them. They encouraged him to apply.



ANGELA ©2000

"She was a face in the crowd in a Leonardo da Vinci painting," Michael explains when asked about this watercolor. "Portraits used to be my favorite to paint. Faces are challenging enough, but to make it look like a particular person is very difficult," he says, adding that this portrait is a personal favorite.

“They sent a British man who worked out of Atlanta, Georgia to check me out. They needed to make sure that I was handicapped, plus painted with my mouth,” Michael says.

For artists like Michael, the MFPA opens doors that they are unable to open themselves. Besides purchasing rights to print his art on greeting cards, the organization awarded Michael a student membership and a scholarship to pursue his art interests.



“I need to get out in nature more,” Michael says, when questioned about his favorite subjects to paint.

Although mandatory accessibility has made it easier for handicapped people to navigate on sidewalks and in public places, natural areas can never be made totally wheelchair friendly. “Most places are not handicapped accessible—the mountains, the forests, the beach,” Michael explains.

A few times on his travels, he’s had to rely on the kindness of strangers. “Once, while vacationing in Ocean City, Maryland, I went out sightseeing and veered off the beaten path. I got stuck in the sand. A nice Japanese tourist pushed me out.”

Even close to home, he’s become hopelessly mired, and had to trust someone to rescue him. “My dog was taking me for a walk down the road, and I got stuck in the loose stones and mud. My neighbor had to pull me out with his Toyota truck. My trusted, loyal dog stuck by my side the whole time until I was out.”

When faced with a problem—like how to keep cool in an unbearably hot classroom at Penn State—Michael is relentless in searching for a solution. “I saw a portable windshield cleaner in a J.C. Whitney Auto Parts catalog, so I sent for it,” he explains. It consisted of a small battery-operated pump, tank and plastic tubing. Michael asked his mother to poke some holes in his ballcap, and attach the tubes to it. “I could just flip a switch and water dribbled out of my cap and cooled me off,” Michael recalls.

“I’m forced to be a problem-solver!” he explains. “You know what they say, ‘Necessity is the mother of invention.’”

Another of his inventions is a custom-made, swivel cup holder that his nephew Christopher Burke modified to fit Michael’s wheelchair. Sadly, Chris died in an auto accident in 2009.



Despite the obvious—that he is unable to do all those everyday tasks that most people take for granted—Michael has developed traits and skills that many “normal” people don’t ever acquire: intense self-motivation, a passion for his work, a burning desire to succeed, and a willingness to inspire others.

Recently, he was invited to demonstrate his style of painting and share his story with about 200 students of Upper Dauphin Elementary and Middle schools.

“It doesn’t matter how you hold the brush, art is in the heart, art is in the mind, not in the hand,” Michael informed the students. “If I lost the ability to paint with my mouth, I’d attach the brush to my head somehow.”

When asked if he has any advice for budding artists, Michael says, “If you know someone who paints, take lessons from them. And don’t give up. If you want to paint, you’ll find a way to do it.

“I learned mostly by just doing. The more you paint, the better you get...but isn’t that the way it is with everything?”



In recognition of Disability Awareness Month, Michael will be demonstrating his art on October 23, 1 to 3 p.m., at the Palmer Museum in State College. The public is invited.



APPALACHIAN TRAIL ©2009



DRAWN IN ©2008



BACKYARD CARDINALS ©2009

Michael Platzer has created close to 800 paintings since he was 15 years old, including two large murals located in Lewistown. A 24-foot by 5-foot mural at the Lewistown Moose Club shows a moose lying in the snow, looking down on Mooseheart, Illinois, a village and school for children operated by the Loyal Order of the Moose. The other mural, of the historic Stone Arch Bridge in Lewistown, is located in Hoenstine Funeral Home on Logan Street.

In addition to being published on greeting cards by the Mouth and Foot Painting Artists (MFPA), his artwork had been featured on cards benefiting the Christopher Reeve Foundation, and Habitat for Humanity about 15 years ago.

For more information on MFPA, visit mfpausa.com, or phone 770.986.7764. Order forms can be printed from their website.

To inquire about obtaining or commissioning an original painting, contact Michael through his website at www.mouthpainter.com or email mplatzer@verizon.net. Some of the paintings shown with this article are available for sale.