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Cedar Crest welcomes local artist, Weber

By: Lisa Mitchell, Parkland News

Cedar Crest College recently welcomed local artist Brett Weber, of Allentown, and his German Shepherd companion Sophi on Feb. 1.

Students, artistic enthusiasts and Weber's friends and family gathered for his presentation at the Cressman Gallery of the Cressman Library.

Projecting images on the wall displaying his art, Weber discussed a selection of his art featured in the gallery's new exhibit "Voyage of Discovery. The Valley." One of his paintings is called "Escape Subtitles: Dreams, Report, Disease," a colorful oil and acrylic painting on canvas, 3.75 feet high and 11.25 feet wide.

His paintings, which have been on display in Chania Crete, Greece to Soho, N.Y., are greatly influenced by his multiple sclerosis.

While finishing his doctorate in neuroscience from Temple University, Weber was diagnosed with progressive relapsing multiple sclerosis a week before he completed his doctorate. Weber said only 6 percent of people with M.S. have been diagnosed with his form of the disease. He has been researching M.S. as both a scientist and an artist ever since.

"Just being invited here was a privilege and unexpected," Weber said.

His connection to Cedar Crest began before his diagnosis when he was enrolled in two courses, art and immunology, at the college; he was the only male student on campus. Weber later completed a bachelor's in fine art, painting and a bachelor's in biology from Moravian College in Bethlehem.

"We really appreciate all the help Brian Higgins [the exhibit director] gave us, hanging the paintings," he said.

What does Weber hope people gain from the presentation?

"I hope this brings more attention to multiple sclerosis," he said. "I hope it instills people with a sense of purpose and how influential every individual and every person can be in any kind of struggle, event or mission."

"My paintings speak to my journey of multiple sclerosis, but they all speak to the needs to have more scientific research to disease in general," Weber continued. "I think more people will awaken to the need."

Weber volunteers for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. Last spring, he traveled to the society's headquarters in New York City to be interviewed for the FacesofMS.org Web site, created in honor of the organizations 60th anniversary. He and 60 others described their experiences in dealing with multiple sclerosis. His face was one of the many "Faces of MS" that were displayed on the NASDAQ building when the society launched the site in March.

"You can do things that you wouldn't expect to do," he said. "I wouldn't have expected to have been on the NASDAQ building."

Among the viewers were Weber's aunt and uncle, Linda and Ken Smith, of Salisbury.

"I really enjoyed his talk, and the paintings are fabulous. It was a very heart warming talk, " said Linda.

"Knowing all the work he had to do to get to where he is today, it means he didn't give up to multiple sclerosis," said Ken. "I hope they [the other viewers] get encouragement from what Brett has done and strive to get to where he's at. He could have given up when he found he had M.S., he didn't."

Marie Matyas, of Allentown, knows Weber and Sophi from going to The Cathedral Church of Saint Catharine of Siena in Allentown. Many of the viewers, she said, are members of the congregation, including Sophi who usually lays in front of the first pew every Sunday at Weber's feet.

She and Weber also have talked about M.S., sharing information and support; her brother-in-law also has been diagnosed with the disease.

What did Matyas like about Weber's presentation?

"I think it was how he named his paintings and what each meant in reference to his disease, how he could pull that out and put it on canvas," she said.

Barbara Traupman, of Bethlehem, said she felt privileged to be able to see and hear Weber's story.

"I [like] the depth and the way he portrays his soul in his art; he's an inspiration to all of us," said Traupman. "I think his message is one of courage, hope and love."

Weber's art will be on display ,in the Cressman Gallery of the Cressman Library through June 3.

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