

Dr. Weber's Journey

How an Allentown man uses science and art to understand his journey with multiple sclerosis

Brett Weber's original plan was to pursue his doctorate in neuroscience, make some new discoveries about nerve regeneration and visual processing in the Leopard Frog, and share his excitement for science with his students. However, life also had something else in store for him.

As an undergraduate, Brett earned two bachelor degrees from Moravian College, one in biology (B.S.), and one in studio art (B.A.). He decided to pursue science after college, but has always enjoyed painting as a leisure pursuit. When Brett was suddenly diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS) in 1997 one week before completing his Ph.D. in neuroscience, he responded as many MS patients do, "MS was not going to stop me from pursuing my plans; from doing what I set out to do!" And indeed, Brett completed his doctorate and taught as a professor at Chatham College in Pittsburgh that year.

By the end of the year, however, he was limping badly and could not walk without a loft strand crutch and foot brace which stabilized his left foot. He decided to return to Philadelphia where he could be closer to his family and deal with his diagnosis fulltime. He took a year off from work, but continued exercising and staying positive. For that year his physical health seemed to stabilize with no MS attacks, although he was still using crutches and a foot splint. Even so, he was feeling self-confident enough that by the end of the year he became eager to return to teaching and researching MS as a scientist. This time, he began work as a professor at Hahnemann University in Philadelphia.

Disappointingly to himself, Brett's condition worsened once again until a severe attack left him paralyzed in his legs and forced him to use a wheelchair fulltime. "When I began using a wheelchair, it was again time to reevaluate my life."

Out of work, Brett spent many days by himself in Philadelphia, painting. "It was an emotionally difficult time for me. My close friend suggested that I do something with all the paintings I was creating. She said 'Why don't you at least start showing them? Make people understand what it's like to have MS'." Only about 6% of people have Brett's form of MS, progressive-relapsing multiple sclerosis according to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. Currently, there is no proven effective treatment. "My friend also decided that I needed some company during the day. The help of a service dog throughout the lonely day, a companion to be with me while everyone else was at work! Suddenly, my life got real busy again, but in a positive way."

Brett began showing his paintings in Philadelphia directly across the street from the Philadelphia Museum of Art and also at the Da Vinci Art Alliance in Philadelphia. <http://www.angelfire.com/ok3/davinci> Today Brett's artwork has been exhibited in galleries located in SOHO, Manhattan, New York, NY; Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Allentown & Bethlehem, PA; Denver, CO; and Hania, Crete, Greece. Brett's artwork continues to be a reminder of one man's life with MS and his call for more scientific

research. Brett's artwork and thoughts have appeared in New York City's art magazine, *ArtisSpectrum*: <http://www.artisspectrum.com/AS.11.web/index.html>

"Painting has been a wonderful way for me to communicate with others, and just as importantly, to release some of the stress that comes from dealing with multiple sclerosis on a day to day basis. I want to show people how therapeutic creativity can be."

And, that's exactly what he's been able to do with the other members of his M.S. Wellness Group, a coordinated program offered through a partnership between Good Shepherd and Lehigh Valley Hospitals. "Our group members embraced the idea." Each person painted (a more or less) abstract piece of art which has since been displayed at Good Shepherd & Lehigh Valley Hospitals, and at the 2006 annual meeting organized by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society Chapter in Philadelphia. In fact, the experience has led some members to continue creating art as a stress-relieving activity. Brett says, "It makes me feel good knowing that something I decided to do for myself during one of the lowest moments in my life is now helping others, too."

http://www.brokenartgallery.com/mcall_com%20-%20MS%20victims%20find%20refuge%20in%20art.htm

The group's paintings are expected to appear this summer (July-Sept) at Zona's Gallery located in Teddy's Café at the Sheraton JetPort in Allentown, Pennsylvania. <http://allentownjetport.com/iflash.asp> Brett will also have artwork on exhibit (April-June). Meet the artist on April 5th, Wednesday night, 6-8pm which will include a book signing by the artist of three new books being published through the Gallery featuring the artwork Brett has exhibited in his "Voyage of Discovery" show to raise public awareness about Progressive Relapsing Multiple Sclerosis.

Today, Brett tells me that he's always trying to follow God's plan for his life. He's still exploring three ideas that have helped him manage his MS in a positive way since he was diagnosed in 1997—simply having faith, staying creative, and finding true companionship with friends and helper animals as the case may be.

Brett reinforces his faith through his church here in Allentown at the Cathedral of Saint Catharine of Siena, where he leads a morning rosary group after 8:00am week day masses. Brett believes that attending services and just beginning each day in a positive way has improved his health dramatically. There is scientific evidence from Duke University to suggest he might be correct:

<http://dukemednews.duke.edu/news/article.php?id=663>

Brett finds companionship in his family and friends including those in wheelchairs. Some can be found at the website: <http://www.wheelchairjunkie.com>. "The support and inspiration of other disabled people has been invaluable to me." In conjunction with his family & friends, the Monks of New Skete books/video tapes entitled The Art of Raising a Puppy & How to Be Your Dog's Best Friend helped him train Sophia, his German Shepherd Helper Dog. <http://www.dogsbestfriend.com> "I had an opportunity to visit the New Skete Community this past September with my cousin Gretchen. Sophia can pick

objects up for me, and can pull my manual wheelchair when I ask her to. Most importantly, she makes me smile, the best medicine!”

Brett stays creative by creating artwork in his studio, and by teaching about creativity in his MS Wellness group. In enthusiastically supporting projects led by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, Brett and his family appear on the <http://www.FaceofMS.org> website, and will participate in the Allentown MS WALK at the Rose Garden Pavilion on May 7th. “Supporting the MS WALK and the National Multiple Sclerosis Society Chapters will bring the CURE for MS sooner rather than later! Everyone is important.” <http://www.nationalmssociety.org/PAE/personal/default.asp?pa=54319171&pd=PAE0E WLK20060507ALL>

Brett moved back to his childhood home in Allentown several years ago, and with the help of his family has converted his garage into his “Broken Art Studio” where he works with other local artists here in town. “I’m blessed with a wonderful family and an exciting group of friends! With regard to seeing the CURE for MS, anything is possible!”

Visit Brett, Sophia & their friends at: <http://www.brokenartgallery.com>

- Brett Weber, Ph.D. and his MS Wellness Program Coordinator Jerry Werner, COTA/L, MSCS will be presenting a poster about their MS Wellness Group’s painting experience later this year at the 20th Annual Conference of the Consortium of Multiple Sclerosis Centers being held in Scottsdale, Arizona (May 31 to June 3, 2006). For more information about the conference visit: <http://www.msca.org/cmssc/index.php>

FaceofMS.org

Allentown resident Brett Weber, a neuroscientist and artist, appears with his family on a new website, <http://www.faceofms.org>. The site, created in honor of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society’s 60th anniversary, includes video clips and interviews with 60 people whose lives have been impacted by MS – whether directly by the disease, or indirectly in their roles as caregivers, researchers, friends and relatives.

Brett is afflicted with progressive-relapsing multiple sclerosis (PRMS): people with this form of MS experience a progressive course from the outset, with obvious, acute attacks along the way. This course is quite rare occurring in only 5% of people with MS.

The site went “live” on March 12. On that day, images from the site – including Brett’s -- were projected onto the walls of the NASDAQ building on Time Square in New York City. His image will also appear as part of a national series of billboards, taxi media, bus shelter cards and mall displays.

Follow this link and click on any of the Webers' photos to open video clips of their experience with MS: <http://www.faceofms.org/browse.php?mode=last&cat=6> The site's home page is: <http://www.faceofms.org>

For interviews with Brett, Carl or Anita Weber, contact them at 610-433-4156 or Art@BrokenArtGallery.com Or visit us online at: <http://www.brokenartgallery.com>