

## Twelve Questions with Local Artist Madison Johnson

Paralyzed artist Madison Johnson answers questions about her passion for painting as well as the 2019 accident that changed her life.

By Matt Starosciak

Madison Johnson's artwork was recently showcased at The Reeves House gallery in downtown Woodstock, Georgia. The event was a resounding success that drew over 100 art enthusiasts and local residents who were treated to both exceptional acrylic paintings as well as an opportunity to meet the artist behind the work.

Johnson's backstory is unique and inspiring. She was injured in a Lake Allatoona diving accident in August of 2019 and suffered nearly complete paralysis. Since that time, she has impressed audiences with both her use of adaptive strategies and tools in her craft as well as her dedication to creating exquisite paintings that illustrate both her journey and the beauty she sees in the world every day.

Below are 12 questions the artist took time to answer this week.

**Where are you from originally and where do you live now?**

I was raised in Acworth and Woodstock and graduated from Etowah High School in 2017. I currently live in a condo in downtown Woodstock above Kilwins ice cream shop, so right in the heart of the action!

**When and how did your accident happen?**

In August of 2019 I was enjoying a day of fun at Allatoona Lake with friends and family when I dove into the water. Of course, I knew something was terribly wrong right away and I ended up severely damaging my C5 vertebrae.

**What impact did your accident have on you physically and emotionally?**

The physical consequences were devastating. I spent over three months in different hospitals during which time I was on a ventilator and unable to even sit up in a chair.



Artists Madison Johnson and Debie Veith

Emotionally, the most difficult part was coming home from the hospital, having reality set-in, and facing people that hadn't seen me since before my accident. That was hard. In addition, my entire family had their hands full with implementing all the training we received at the hospital. However, it didn't take too long for me to realize that I did not want to live my life dwelling in sadness and anger. I'm a positive person by nature and believe in moving toward the future, not the past. While I knew that my life would never be the same, I understood that it was still very much worth living and I could accomplish great things that I put my mind to doing.

Of course, there are still tough days. But I've learned to give myself time to feel those difficult emotions and then learn from them and move on.

[continue reading >](#)



Madison shortly after her 2019 accident

**What made you decide to take-up painting?**

While I was never great with a pencil and paper, I've always been pretty creative and artistic. At 15 years old, I was a very good cake decorator and thrived at my job at Great American Cookies. About a year after my accident, I became interested in finding a new hobby which prompted my parents to buy me an easel, paints, and various adaptive tools that allowed me to start putting colors on the canvas.

**How challenging was painting in those early days?**

Very. I remember being frustrated because my arms were shaky and the work itself wasn't great. But over time, and with a lot of patience and practice, I gained more control over the brush and started to produce pieces that I felt proud to call my own.

**How long does it take you to complete a painting?**

30-100 hours. So a long time. When I paint, it's usually for many hours at a time. I like to set a goal for where I want to be at the end of the session and I'm happy to say that I usually surpass it.

**Has anyone helped you with your painting?**

Yes. I have a phenomenal support team of friends, family, and great caretakers who keep me motivated and help me access and use my adaptive tools and art supplies. A lot of my improvement and creativity also comes from my mentor and friend, Debbie Veith.

**Tell us about Debbie. How did you meet her and the relationship grow?**

Debbie lives on my floor at the condo. She initially offered to help me with any medical-related needs because, well, she's a very kind person, and was also a nurse before she retired. One day we started talking about my painting and I learned

that she's an accomplished artist. She brought me some of her supplies and gave me advice about everything from seeking out inspiration to the technical aspects of painting. Debbie has been nothing short of a true blessing to me.

**What is the best advice Debbie has given you?**

"Forget being perfect, just be free." Those are some of the most powerful words spoken to me in my life. Debbie's input and coaching allowed me to stop being frustrated when things don't go exactly right. She taught me that painting is about self-reflection and expression, and that I can always paint over a mistake or change something I'd like to improve.

**What's the most difficult part of the painting process for you?**

Believe it or not, it's not the physical part of it. It's having the courage to put my emotions on the canvas. But pushing past that part is what makes the result so satisfying.

**What do you think when you look at one of your finished pieces?**

Many times I think about how far I've come since that day at the lake in 2019. Other times, it's as simple as what could I do to make the piece better. Debbie once told me that "a painting is never finished, it's just given up on." I like that philosophy because it says that at a certain point you have to accept the work you've done and move on to the next exciting project. My life is kinda like that!

**What do you want to do with art in the future?**

I would love to have my work consistently showcased in galleries or even in a museum someday. But more than that, I want to draw awareness to keeping a positive mindset and staying strong. Nothing good happens from focusing on the negative and I truly believe that everyone is capable of training their mind to create a really beautiful and unique life for themselves. Live fearlessly, love deeply, and laugh all the time. ■



Madison preparing for her show at the Reeves House in Woodstock