

Editorial

HOW ART HELPED ME HEAL



Samonte Cruz.

Photo: Bree Prosser

by Samonte Cruz

There are moments in our lives where an event happens, and afterward nothing is the same. People can almost categorize their lives into snapshots of “before” and “after.” Often these are happy events, like the birth of a child, but they can also be painful, like a traumatic accident. In my case it was the latter. On February 26, 2010, I was hit by an SUV as a pedestrian in Vancouver. That moment completely changed the trajectory of my life.

The accident left me with a broken neck, sternum and leg, a collapsed lung and a head injury. After three months in a full-torso brace, my bones had healed enough for me to begin the hard work of building back my strength and function.

What I didn’t know at the time is that despite my years-long dedication to physiotherapy, acupuncture and chiropractic treatments, chronic pain would remain a constant in my life. I did eventually make it back to work, but the price of maintaining my career came at the cost of almost everything else in my life. After work and my commute home I was in too much pain to cook for myself, or clean, and I was left without energy to spend time with even my closest friends.

I had to learn to separate my self-worth from my ability to work. I realized that I was still trying to “get back” to a life I was living before disability, giving everything I had in order to regain a level of function that was no longer sustainable for me. It was difficult to accept, but eventually I made the decision to resign from the job I had held for nearly a decade, in order to focus on my health.

I let go so I could make space to rebuild.

I moved out of the city to allow myself time to rest and recover. I started brainstorming new ideas for employment. I had always wanted the chance to develop my creative abilities, and started thinking seriously about metalsmithing and small object design, which seemed like the perfect combination of personal expression and technical skill.

Eventually, I called Laura White, jewellery instructor and coordinator at Kootenay Studio Arts (KSA), Selkirk College, to find out about the program and ask if they could accommodate my disability. We talked for over an hour, and I hung up the phone absolutely convinced that it was the right program for me. Two years later, in June of 2017, I graduated from KSA with honours, and with a skilled trade I can now do from home.

The biggest lesson I’ve learned as an artist living with a disability is that understanding and respecting my limitations is not the same thing as giving up. I took two years of part-time study to complete a ten-month program. Even at the reduced pace, the workload was extremely challenging for me. I have been in physiotherapy for years, but training at KSA felt like its own intensive rehabilitation program not only physically, but mentally as well. I had to build up strength in my arms and hands. I had to teach myself how to hold and adapt tools to account for the decreased motor function on my right side. But the hardest thing to learn was to stop comparing my speed, production or abilities to those of my fellow students. I was on my own journey, carving out a path that worked for me, and when I let my disability become a conduit for adaptation and creative problem solving was when I really began to thrive in my new craft.

I also noticed the positive impacts that developing an artistic practice was having on my mental health. Instead of struggling to maintain a routine that was unsustainable, I was seeking inspiration in my everyday life and looking for ideas to incorporate into my creative design process. Instead of being reminded of all the activities I could no longer do, I experienced the deep satisfaction that comes from bringing an idea into a real-life, 3D form. I spent my days pushing myself to the edge of my capacity, learning and creating as much as I possibly could, because I found the creative process so invigorating. When I came home and practically collapsed from exhaustion, the joy from a day spent creating would inevitably get me out of bed the next morning.

One of my strategies for coping with daily chronic pain is to purposefully cultivate more joy in my life. I figure if I can create more experiences that bring me joy, even if I am still experiencing the same amount of pain, the relative space the pain takes up in my life is diminished. I am still healing from the physical trauma of my accident, but learning a craft and developing an artistic practice has been a transformative component of my rehabilitation. I have a creative outlet to express myself. I feel I have a new purpose in life, creating meaningful objects that my clients will be able to cherish for generations to come. I have attainable professional goals that excite me and motivate me to keep healing and moving forward.

Learning a craft like metalsmithing has opened up a whole new chapter in my life. The process of creating treasured objects for people has become like a mindful meditation practice for me as I cut, file, sand: remaining present to witness the transformation of raw materials into a new form of my design. I had always meant to take time out of my busy life in order to devote time to developing my artistic practice, but it took breaking my neck in order for me to actually do it. If you’ve been thinking about taking up a creative outlet, I’m here to tell you that I’ve experienced the positive effects first-hand, and to remind you that your life can truly change in an instant. So what are you waiting for?

Samonte Cruz is a mixed-gender, mixed-race, Filipino metalsmith, artist and educator based in Nelson, currently making custom, one-of-a-kind jewellery and accessories, while working toward the launch of their own online shop. This summer Samonte will also be teaching two beginner jewellery classes at Kootenay Studio Arts, Selkirk College, and coordinating an art exhibition to highlight the work of LGBTQ+ artists living in the Kootenays. For more information about the artist visit samontecruzstudios.com or find them on Facebook and Instagram: [@samontecruzstudios](https://www.instagram.com/samontecruzstudios).