



Noyes
Museum of Art
STOCKTON UNIVERSITY

Artist Statement

April 10 – April 28, 2024

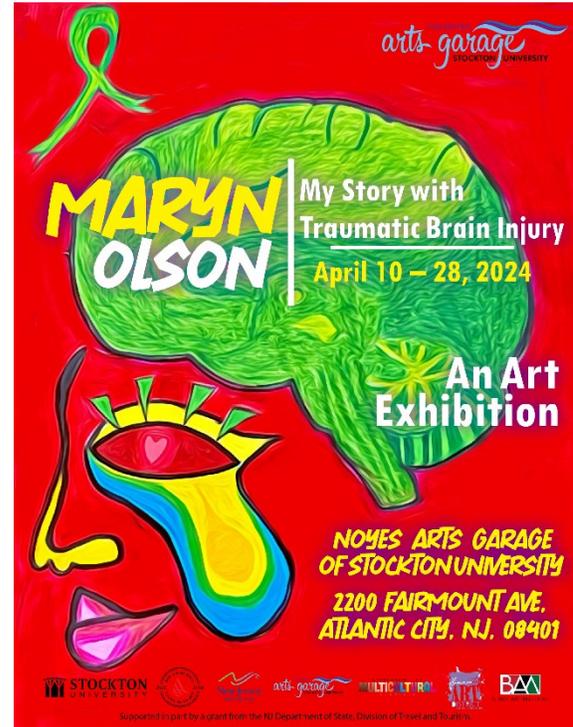
Maryn Olson: My Story with a Traumatic Brain Injury

- **Opening Reception:**
April 13th, 2024
1:00 – 3:00 PM

Artist Statement-

I was twenty-one when I had my Brain Injury. I went down a hill on my skateboard without a helmet in Upstate New York and gained too much speed. I got speed wobbles and fell unconscious when I hit the pavement. I was unconscious for about 30 minutes until I received medical help. I had a cranial hemorrhage, a brain contusion, and broken neck bones.

The doctors put draining tubes into my head to drain the swelling, but that did not drain the blood as much as it needed to; I had a stroke and was rushed into surgery. The doctors performed a craniectomy, which removed a portion of my skull to reduce the brain bleed. The surgery went well, and I was in a critical recovery stage for four weeks, where I stayed at Albany Medical Center. Immediately after my craniectomy, I struggled to stand up and move my left side, including my fingers, arm, and leg, which were a lot weaker than my right side. Every time I stood up, I got intensely dizzy and lightheaded. This got more tolerable over time. I bumped into many things on my left side but did not acknowledge why this was happening. The doctors performed scanning eye tests, and I found out my eyes had blind spots due to my brain bleed, suffocating my optic nerves. There has been an improvement in my daily functioning, but this disability has affected my life in many ways, the most significant challenge being that I cannot drive. I may be able to drive in the future with vision therapy and driving school to learn how to drive safer with visual scanning patterns and accommodations like extra mirrors.



From the hospital, I went into inpatient rehabilitation for two weeks, and then I was free to go home and start outpatient rehabilitation. I worked with a physical, occupational, recreational, and speech therapist. I was on a strict schedule from seven in the morning to eight at night. Like my experience in the hospital, I was woken up every hour of the night to be asked my name, the daily date, and the current location. I recovered at a breakneck pace.

The doctors called me a miracle every time I had to return to the hospital for appointments. I never knew why they called me a miracle or were always so kind to me. They treated me as if I were a celebrity, and this was because I had recovered. I am so thankful to say that I recovered so well from such a life-threatening injury. I spent four months without half of my skull. I struggled with dizziness, lightheadedness, and self-esteem. I had to wear a helmet if I was walking or standing; I sure did not like that helmet. I felt like a completely different person and just missed my life before my brain injury.

After my craniectomy, I had my cranioplasty within four months to have replacement skull surgery. After this surgery, I stayed in the hospital for about a week or two and was on pain meds. I left the hospital with a drain tube that was meant to drain the swelling. I stopped taking pain meds within a couple of days and felt a little closer to myself again. Since the beginning of this journey, it has been a wild roller coaster of highs and lows.

I am finding new ways to function daily that work better for me now than they did before. For example, TBI survivors may need more structure and reliability because it may take longer to process new information. I am easily overwhelmed and stressed by plans changing, lack of structure, and unpredictability; what helps me and other brain injury survivors is keeping a planner, reminders, and making yourself aware of where you put something down (I lose things a lot more frequently than I have before my TBI) and overall putting more effort into your daily routine to ensure things move smoothly. I have noticed that between school, transportation, work, and personal artmaking, I need a structured balance between what I need to do and what I love. I am not as ready as I once was to manage these things simultaneously.

My mental health has been my top priority for these past few months. I fell into a dark place where I adopted self-destructive habits unexpectedly. Before my TBI, I have always been an extremely positive person and incredibly determined. Immediately after my brain injury, I was very unaware of what I had just been through. I never had time to process my fall; I was unconscious, on painkillers for the weeks I was in the hospital, and I do not remember much of that time. Once I was gaining more clarity daily, I started feeling the emotional turbulence and traumas that I went through. What has helped me pull myself out of this is Love. Art making has always been an interest of mine since I was little, but it never benefited me as much as it does as I heal from my TBI. I can paint my frustrations and

sadness away. I have experienced a beautiful transformation in the act of creating. When I was in a state of crashing and burning, I had to force myself to find better ways of managing the grief. At this time, I was aware that I was spiraling, and when I would become irritable, angry, or anxious, I would bring out anything I could paint on canvases, cardboard, notebooks, and sketchbooks. Amid my chaotic panic and tears, I would lay all my mediums and materials around me and start laying paint on the canvases. I was in a fragile emotional turmoil from the beginning of my creating act. Yet, as the process went on, I became calm and grounded. I could even explain and understand my feelings in a way I could not before. Creating is the one thing that makes me feel like me regardless of the situation I am in or the physical condition I am in. In addition to building, I have support from my family, friends, professors, doctors, colleagues, and online support groups. When I joined online support groups on Facebook, I received insight into other survivors' experiences; I was able to relate to and receive resolutions and information I had never heard before, even from doctors.

I never knew how strong and determined I was until this event. When I was in the hospital, I could not move my left fingers, but I practiced every day. I stood up; I took a step forward with all my energy. Even if it meant I would be drained of energy from standing up and sitting down. Since then, I have been tackling every challenge that comes my way. I passionately believe that the support systems around me power my strength. They have encouraged me so much in their ways that now, I want to shine so brightly for each person who has helped me in a big or small way. I want to spread awareness about brain injury to help anyone who can hear and see me. I am here standing tall and proud for you, for me, and for the brain injury survivors. My heart beats just like yours is in this moment, one love.

**To learn more about Maryn Olson and her work, visit her on Instagram at @marynskylar
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