

## FOOT PRINTS - POLIO HASN'T STOPPED NEAL CARSTEN FROM PURSUING HIS PASSION FOR CREATING ART<

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At the dental practice they share on James Street, Verdi and Todd Carsten often hear praise for some of the artwork they've put up on the walls.

"They don't realize a disabled person did it," said Todd Carsten, Verdi's son. "Sometimes I'll tell them, sometimes I won't."

When he does tell them, the usual response is disbelief. Then Carsten tells them to look at the paintings closely, and he points out the toe prints.

"I've always felt my work should stand on its own merit," said Neal Carsten, Todd's younger brother. "The fact that it's done with a disability is secondary. I don't want to excuse my work for weaknesses because I have a disability."

Carsten once painted by hand; now he uses only the big toe of his right foot.

In 1976, Carsten was a 25-year-old math and science teacher at a junior high school in Phoenix, Ariz. That summer, he traveled to California and Mexico before returning to Arizona to prepare for the new school year.

He woke up one morning in August and could barely get out of bed, so he called a friend to take him to the emergency room. "I walked in and spent longer than I wanted to," he said.

The doctors at the Arizona hospital, Carsten said, were mystified by his symptoms and took a couple of weeks to diagnose polio. "In this country, it's like a forgotten disease," he said.

Carsten was flown to Syracuse and spent the next 10 months at Upstate Medical Center.

It took him almost that long to stand up.

It has taken him far longer to talk publicly about his disability, and his art, which now are forever linked. "Maybe I've never fully come to grips with the handicap," he said. "Like anybody with a disability, I'd prefer to be whole. I'm a little self-conscious."

Carsten has bulbar poliomyelitis, a form of the acute viral disease that affects the nerves in the medulla oblongata, the lowest portion of the brain just above the spinal cord. The virus affects swallowing, and causes respiratory and circulatory distress.

The disease also causes muscles to atrophy. Carsten has lost the use of his arms and hands, and receives round-the-clock care through St. Joseph's Hospital's home-health-care agency.

But society's changing attitudes toward people with disabilities, and Carsten's desire to be more productive, convinced him that he should join those artists who have chosen to be public figures.

"The tone of society now has shifted," he said. "We're much more aware of people with disabilities. People are not as surprised or affected when I meet them for the first time."

Carsten's first art exhibition will be in November at Onondaga Free Library on Onondaga Hill, not too far from where he grew up. About a dozen of his paintings will be shown alongside watercolors by Syracuse artist Agnes Schumm.

"The thing that impresses me is what he is able to achieve in detail, considering the fact that he uses strictly his toe to mix and apply colors," said Schumm. "Of course he can't be as detailed as other artists who can utilize their hands, but it may just add something to his work."

### Learning new skills

Last fall, Carsten moved into a second-floor apartment in the former Union Free School in Camillus. A small room next to his bedroom serves as his studio. He sits in a chair, his arms on padded armrests. To his left are a pair of 4-by-8-foot windows that beckon the

afternoon sun.

On the opposite wall is a framed black-and-white studio portrait of Carsten, taken when he was about 6. He's standing, wearing a sportcoat and tie, holding a children's book. Next to the portrait is one of Carsten's own paintings, of irises in a vase.

Artistically, it's not his favorite, but it's the last painting his mother helped him with before she died in 1991.

At Carsten's feet, his nurse has placed a clean illustration board to paint on, a small bowl of water, a folded towel and an assortment of creamy tempera paints.

His left foot holds the illustration board to keep it steady, while his right foot moves quickly. He dips the big toe into the circle of white paint, then into one of the other colors - black, yellow, green, red and blue - and applies some paint to the white board, striving for just the right color mix in just the right spot.

Then his toe finds the bowl of water and the towel to remove the paint. Over and over, he repeats the process of mixing and painting, rinsing and drying.

He uses only the big toe on his right foot, never a brush. The years have taught him how to gauge how much paint he has on the bottom of the toe.

"I've learned how to use my foot in such a way that I can create different effects, depending on the amount of paint, what part of my toe I use, and the pressure," he said. "It's just the same as with a brush."

Anyone who looks at a finished Carsten painting would never guess the other wrinkle in his technique - to give his leg muscles a break, and to avoid dripping paint onto his work, Carsten rotates the board at his feet and paints only the section that is closest to him.

In a painting of a bowl of flowers, for example, Carsten paints the top of the flowers while the board is facing in the opposite direction. Picture this - place a clock flat on the floor, then stand above it and turn it so that you're looking down at upside-down numbers. Now try to tell the time.

That's how Carsten creates the top half of his paintings. Then he turns the board around and works on the bottom half - mixing and painting, rinsing and drying.

It's tedious, tiring work.

"It's like doing leg-lifts for two hours," he said. "It really takes a lot of effort."

Two hours is his limit, because the polio causes him to tire easily.

"Some paintings come together quickly. I can put them together in a week. Others take longer," he said. "If I'm not pleased, I go over an area two or three times if I don't feel it's working."

While Carsten was a student at Canisius College in Buffalo in the early 1970s, he took art courses at Damien College. His favorite painters were then, and still are, French impressionists, whose style favors dabs of color as opposed to continuous brushstrokes.

"It's very adaptable to my technique. I usually don't need a lot of very fine detail," Carsten said. "I'm always looking for a new effect, a new look. ... If I feel something is pleasing, or I'm looking for a certain mood, I'll use it."

One of his trademarks is using "unlikely colors in nature" - purple trees, a deep blue brook. The colors in Carsten's paintings sing, Schumm said.

A little help from his friends

On the wall next to Carsten's bed is a small pen-and-ink drawing he did by hand in 1974, before he became ill. The sketch is one of a series of three portraits he did in his early 20s. They depict a sailor, a rabbi and a Kansas wheat farmer.

The sailor drawing he gave away as a wedding gift, and the rabbi went to an aunt. He kept the wheat farmer, which he drew from a photograph he saw in National Geographic.

"I liked the expression on his face," Carsten said. "I keep it near the bed because of the look of intensity. I use it as an inspiration, to set my face straight ahead."

During Carsten's stay at Upstate 17 years ago, the physical and occupational therapists learned of his interest in art, and suggested he try painting with his feet. The staff took some plywood and fashioned a base for Carsten to paint on.

"I began doing almost childlike, kindergarten paintings on cardboard and large sheets of paper," he said. His art has changed, but he still uses the same wooden base from the hospital.

Carsten left Upstate in 1977, and moved in with his parents, Verdi and Margaret Carsten, and his two brothers, on Onondaga Hill. He painted for about three years, but became discouraged when his work didn't attract much interest. He stopped for four years or so, but resumed after his family encouraged him to get back at it.

"I've become more successful the second time around," Carsten said. "I'm more aggressive, and I've met (local artist) Hall Groat and several other people who encouraged me. Things started happening."

A framed painting by Groat hangs above Carsten's dining room table.

Carsten telephoned him about four years ago, and asked to come to Groat's studio to see his work. The pair have met there several times and have exchanged paintings.

"He helped motivate me, get me out of hiding," Carsten said.

In an exhibition of works by several artists, Groat said, there's no way anyone would guess Carsten's paintings were done with his toe, much less single them out as inferior to the others.

He calls Carsten's paintings "subtle and sophisticated."

"He's very aware of what art is and what makes a good painting," said Groat. "Once you're aware of it, any way you can get the paint down, you're fine."

Groat even told Carsten he wanted to do a toe-painting to see what it was like, but he's never gotten around to trying it.

"I think if I painted with my toe, I'd paint like he does," he said.

Carsten has sold about 50 paintings, asking \$150 to \$300 for each. The money is put into a private charitable trust because Carsten receives Medicaid and Social Security Disability Income benefits.

Looking to the future

In the past couple of years, Carsten said, he's forced himself to paint four days a week, whether or not he feels up to it. "This last year, I think I've done my best art," he said.

Last fall, after his father remarried and prepared to sell the Onondaga Hill home the three boys grew up in, Carsten moved into his apartment. He's decorated it with some of the antiques he's collected since he was 18, plus a few of his own paintings.

In the living room hangs a large, untitled abstract painting he did when he was at Canisius. In the hallway is another of his pre-illness paintings, done in 1974, of three sailboats on the water.

Those reminders of the past, like the drawing of the wheat farmer near his bed, help Carsten look to the future. His quest for new ideas and techniques includes regular trips to libraries for art books, and to the Everson Museum of Art to look at exhibits by other artists.

"I appreciate the level of their work. It's an inspiration to me," he said. "I'll take one element they've used successfully, and use it in one of my paintings to help it along."

Carsten is about to try something he has wanted to do for a long time - create "pop art" paintings that are larger, more contemporary and more fun than the small still-lives and nature scenes he's been doing. He's also going to experiment with using his entire foot, or at least more than just his big toe.

All that's required, of course, are many hours of mixing and painting, rinsing and drying.

"I do the best I can," Carsten said. "I don't worry about what I can't do."

• Caption: PHOTO Al Campanie/Staff Photographer Neal Carsten, who has polio, painted this picture using his toe to mix and apply the paint. Color. Al Campanie/Staff Photographer Neal Carsten paints a picture using a wood base that was made for him by the staff at Upstate Medical Center in 1977. He mixes the colors with his toe on palette paper. Color. Al Campanie/Staff Photographer This is a pen and ink drawing by Neal Carsten. It was done in 1974, before he contracted polio. Al Campanie/Staff Photographer Neal Carsten poses in his apartment with some of his recent works.

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