

Least Likely Places.

At the age of 20, I found myself arrested and charged with a crime I did not commit. A year or so later, I was sentenced to die by lethal injection for someone else's crime. That was over 30 years ago, and obviously, I am still alive and still fighting to prove my innocence, but that's another story for another day. This story is about the joy and beauty of discovery in the least likely place.

It was on deathrow that I discovered a deep love and appreciation for art, painting in particular. As a youngster growing up, I wasn't that much into art of any kind. On occasions, I would draw pictures of World War II battleships for some reason, and the "Starship Enterprise," the one captained by James T. Kirk. (My fellow trekkies will recognize the reference 😊) Other than that, my most vivid "artistic" memory is of me attempting to draw a likeness of John F. Kennedy, showing it to my mother, and her commenting on what a good drawing it was of Jimmy Carter.

While on deathrow, I met a man who actually was an artist and did beautiful paintings. Soon after, I discovered that he and other guys were selling their paintings for a nice piece of change. Sadly, in the beginning, money was my motivation for wanting to learn how to paint. I just wanted to be less of a financial burden on my then-wife and family. Despite that fact, this kind and decent man agreed to teach me how to paint. I bought some cheap paints, brushes, and canvas (I didn't yet know that the quality

of my work would be effected by the quality of my materials) and went to work.

I began by learning how to do landscapes and seascapes. They quickly became my favorite subjects. My teacher told me this was the way I would learn how to mix and create colors.

It would also give me an understanding of blending and brushstrokes, and prepare me for my eventual jump to other subject matter, such as still lifes and portraiture, etc.

Quicker than I thought, that love and appreciation I mentioned earlier began to grow. I was turning a blank piece of canvas into something more. I was creating with my own hands. There was something extremely fulfilling and liberating about that.

Once I had a grasp of the basics, I decided to buy myself some higher quality materials. As soon as I began to use them it felt like I had upgraded from a junker to a Mercedes Benz. My work improved almost instantly.

I was often my harshest critic when it came to my painting (it's a Virgo thing[™]), but I knew I had arrived so to speak, when an officer asked me if I intended to sell this particular seascape I was working on. It took everything in me to temper the pride and excitement I felt at that moment. I also

felt a resurgence of self-worth that my time on death row had been slowly and steadily chipping away at.

That self-worth peaked when, for the first time, I was able to tell my then-wife and my family---"No, you don't need to send me any money right now"--- because I had sold a painting. And although financial independence was my initial motivator, that soon became a convenient by-product of a creative fire that had been lit within me and continues to burn brightly to this day.

Unfortunately, I no longer paint because it is practically impossible to do so where I am currently housed, but in my head I am painting all the time.

Am I grateful for coming to prison? Never. But am I grateful to have met my friend who helped me discover the beauty and love of painting? Always. I hope I made him proud. May he continue to rest in peace.

Tony Enis