

Disabled Union County artist to showcase work in Smithsonian exhibit

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Jennifer Brown/The Star-Ledger

New Jersey artist Amy Charmatz works in her studio in her Springfield home. She will have her work shown at the Smithsonian.

SPRINGFIELD (Union County) — Although the glass was only half full, she knew that its contents would be sweet and delicious anyway.

Amy Charmatz' little black notebook sits on her drawing table, as much a part of her art as paint, brushes and paper.

The book is filled with her sayings, written in a child-like script, a forced penmanship drawn by a tight-fisted grip.

But the wisdom in those scrawls are anything but child-like. They are very adult. A few are about disappointment, anxiety and fear. But most speak to survivor's serenity; the long journey to discovering you can take whatever life dishes out.

"I tell everybody, 'art saves lives.' It saved mine." She says with child-like enthusiasm. "I want the world to know this!"

Her new collection is called "Truths," based on her sayings. Five paintings from "Truths" were picked for this summer's Smithsonian exhibit of artists with disabilities called "Revealing Culture." It opens June 8 at the S. Dillon Ripley Center in Washington D.C., and Charmatz is the only New Jersey artist showing.

She usually tried to smile but sometimes her mouth wouldn't work right.

Amy Charmatz got her first brain tumor at age 7, and a second at age 11. Both were benign, but aggressive. The surgeries left her balance precarious, and her hearing and eyesight diminished. She walks today with a wheeled walker, and when she stands alone or tries to reach for things, those near her hold their breath. She is always on the verge of falling. But she always catches herself.

Charmatz says her limits have enhanced art. "I have shaky hands and lousy vision. I'm very meticulous but I no longer try to be perfect."

That has given her artistic freedom. "My disabilities have influenced my style."

She always dreaded what came next.

Amy Charmatz' mother is Joan Goldsmith, a well-known local artist. But Charmatz pursued nursing, then social work as a young woman. She graduated from Seton Hall and got a master's degree from Rutgers, and worked for a number of years at JFK Medical Center in Edison.

"Then I got sick."

Charmatz uses the word "sick" to describe a six-year depression, brought on by the disintegration of shunts from the brain surgeries.

"It threw me off. I went into a black hole. I went days without getting out of bed."

She was afraid of people, but among her (kitchen) appliances she was a lioness.

"I didn't want to go out. I couldn't. I didn't want to do anything."

Her husband, Leslie Charmatz, kept her connected with the outside world. "He got me through it. He is the greatest husband in the world. He would force me to go outside. He'd say, 'Let's just go.' We were just married and he stuck with me through all that."

She knew that there was always someone there for her.

An art therapist, Janica Hannay, opened a door for her. Her mother and Fran Willner, the grand dame of suburban Essex artists, pushed her through.

It started with the simple act of decorating her canes. Painting, wrapping lace, molding cherubic or animal faces out of resin.

"We worked on the first few with her," Willner said.

She tried to believe that life could really be wonderful.

It unleashed her talent. With exuberance. "She is so excited by everything she does," her mother said.

She made jewelry. She made house charms. It was art, sold in museums.

"I realized if I could make myself busy for even 15 minutes, I could put the depression aside."

She made sculptures of twisted figures, and masks, and then paintings. Some call it folk art, some call it outsider art, some call it naive art.

"It all means art by untrained people. It's art from the heart."

Shows and acknowledgment followed. And now, the Smithsonian.

She tried to remember she lived a charmed life.

"When I applied I thought, 'I'll never be considered. I'll never get in.' I still can't believe it! I still don't think my life, or my art, is remarkable, but people tell me it is."

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