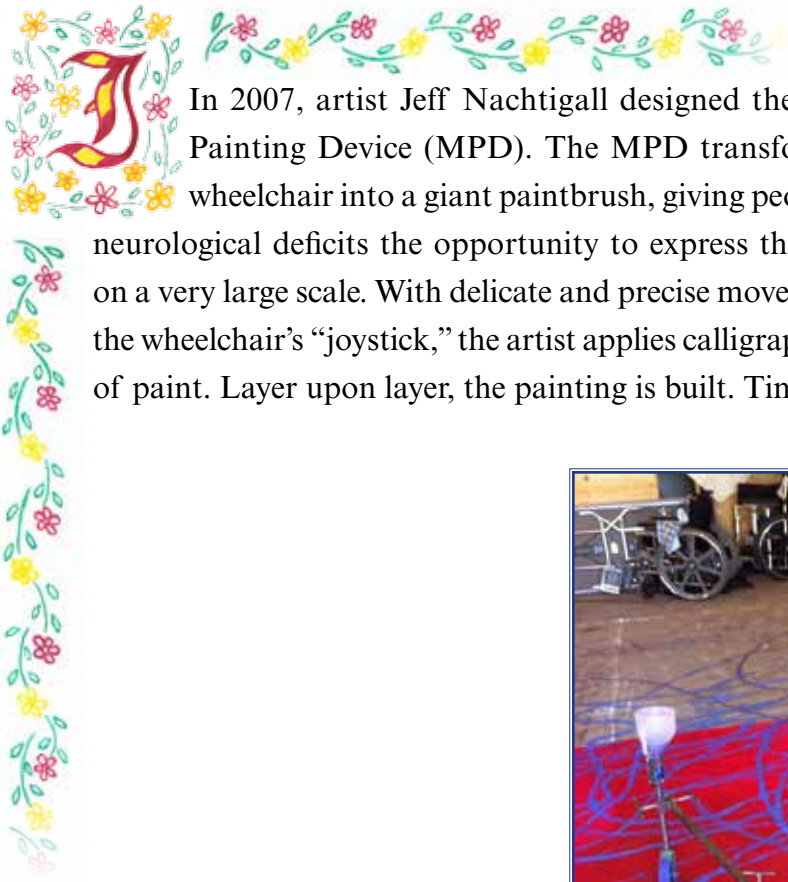


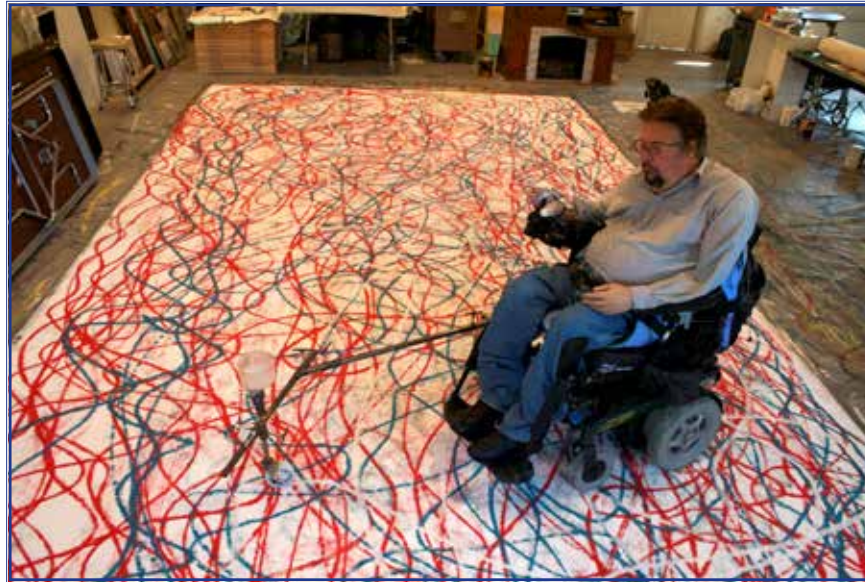
The Wheelchair as Paintbrush: The Mobile Painting Device



In 2007, artist Jeff Nachtigall designed the Mobile Painting Device (MPD). The MPD transforms the wheelchair into a giant paintbrush, giving people with neurological deficits the opportunity to express themselves on a very large scale. With delicate and precise movements of the wheelchair's "joystick," the artist applies calligraphic lines of paint. Layer upon layer, the painting is built. Time passes

and the work evolves. Emotion is expressed and decisions are made until the artist is satisfied. This is a deliberate process. The accident is denied, as the artist is in full control. This is not a "virtual" substitute or computer-generated facsimile. It plays out in real time, on a real canvas, with real results.





The uniquely created mobile painting device has opened an incredible door for me to the world of art. I have been enabled to be creative and expressive with my wheelchair, and to have fun while creating great paintings I can be proud of. It has definitely been a good and defining experience, taking my disability and through it allowing me to express my creative side. I spin and loop across the canvas, spreading paint in broad strokes, creating lines and dimensions, watching as the canvas is swallowed up with different colors. Lines are overlapping and twisting and turning, the excitement within me teeming up. It is thrilling as the art takes form. Then the finished work, what I like to call wheelchair calligraphy, is a piece of art completed: something that is different to every observer; something that makes me feel joy at the work I have created. Never would I have imagined that one day I would be able to transform my wheelchair into a paintbrush. That is truly amazing and innovative, and I have Jeff to thank for thinking outside the box.

Painting has helped me to see that there is more to me . . . to see that I can be artistic and unique. Each painting has its different lines and colors; each one has its own voice, to speak in volumes to the ability within the disability. It is awesome. I am very thankful that Jeff chose me to be the first person to use the Mobile Painting Device. It has been an encouraging journey, as people have complimented me on how much they like my works of art. I would have to say it has been a confidence builder, knowing that I have this creative skill to paint these works that stand out and are unlike any others. I would end by saying that the MPD has changed my life for the better. It has enriched my inner man and allowed me to feel great happiness. So I am thankful.

Matt Proctor, artist



I first met Larry Fitzpatrick at a long-term care facility in October 2006. He raced passed me in his power wheelchair at top speed, expertly weaving his way through the crowded and narrow hallways. He was grinning from ear to ear, and the glint in his eyes hinted to a man who likes to push the envelope. Larry has muscular dystrophy. He is quadriplegic and drives his wheelchair with a joystick that he operates with a head-stick. He is unable to speak and communicates with an assistive device for speech. He may not have full use of his

body, but he has a sharp mind, a keen intellect, a wry sense of humor, and a big heart.

I was the “new kid” on the block, recently hired as the Artist-in-Residence with the Saskatoon Health Region in Saskatchewan, Canada. I was in the process of setting up an art studio at Sherbrooke Community Centre, something that was conceptually, logistically, and physically foreign to the administration and residents of this long-term care facility. This was an equally foreign environment for me, as well. My



preconceptions of what I was getting into were challenged immediately. And our mutual education began on day one.

The number of people that were using wheelchairs immediately struck me. This is where they all were. I didn't see them on the streets or in the neighborhoods that comprise this small city. They were safely tucked away, out of sight and out of mind. I must admit that I never noticed the absence of individuals using wheelchairs in my community—or any other, for that matter. Needless to say, my views on long-term care, aging, and disability were instantly turned on their heads.

Within a few weeks, the studio was up and running. It was a small space, but it was in a central location with high visibility and accessibility. The residents appreciated the drop-

in concept and responded well to my methodology. They came in droves, and it wasn't long before the studio was overflowing with artists eager to express themselves.

I had to quickly overcome my introverted tendencies. As my confidence grew, I started approaching more residents, encouraging them to come into the studio and “make a mess.” I engaged Larry in conversation and asked if I could stick a brush on the end of his head-stick. He smiled and typed his response: an emphatic “YES” in the robotic voice that we commonly associate with Stephen Hawking.

I stapled a canvas to the wall and set him up in the crowded space. There wasn't much room to maneuver, but that shouldn't have mattered, as I assumed that he would be



making paintings that were no larger than the reach of his head-stick. But I soon learned how wrong I was.

Larry began to paint long, horizontal lines of color, one on top of the other, like a giant layer cake or the stratification found in sedimentary rocks. When the extent of his reach was met, he powered up his chair, manipulated the joystick, and propelled himself to where he wanted to be. The paintbrush, dripping paint, remained attached to his head-stick as he effortlessly navigated the tight quarters of the studio. Not once did he come in contact with the wall, another resident, a wheelchair, or even my foot!

I had a “light bulb” moment. Larry taught me an important lesson in that crowded studio. Prior to that moment,

I focused on the limitations *of* the wheelchair and transferred those limitations to the person *in* the wheelchair. I assumed that Larry was confined to his chair. It didn’t occur to me that the chair was a tool that enabled him to independently pursue activities in his daily life.

My approach immediately changed and I adopted the “guerrilla warfare” tactic of taking a perceived weakness and turning it into a strength. After identifying the strengths of the wheelchair, I considered it a tool with inherent advantages. The wheelchair allowed the user to effortlessly make a large-scale painting with fluidity and grace. This was the birth of the Mobile Painting Device, or MPD.

The Mobile Painting Device has laid down thousands



of miles of paint over the last seven years. Individuals in communities across Canada and the United States have used the MPD to express themselves and to explore their creativity. Therapists utilize the MPD as an assessment tool in their practices, and healthcare providers recognize its potential to effectively uncover a client's individual story, thereby allowing a clinician to more clearly see the person behind the patient. The MPD helps challenge the stereotypes and stigma surrounding those living with special needs, and highlights the achievements of often overlooked and marginalized individuals who are truly ready, willing, and able.





My involvement in using the Mobile Painting Device (MPD) was an unforgettable experience. From more than half a dozen volunteers to the artistic expertise of Jeff Nachtigall, many people worked together to give myself and five other fortunate people the opportunity to use a fifth wheel to paint by simply wheeling. Although it may sound a little cliché, this painting technique is very much a poetic experience due to the effort that goes into each line on canvas. From each colorful line, one can see a documentation of each push, thought, and emotional effort that went into the artistic performer's use of the paint wheel. I use the word "performer" because each person who took part in creating the painting did not simply do their work inside

of a building in solitude, but took to the outdoors, with nature and people surrounding them, to create a work of physical and emotional expression. All in all, what became of the Mobile Painting Device experience is a beautiful painting on canvas for all visitors, staff, and patients to see outside of the Physiotherapy Department at the Ottawa Rehab Centre. And there I can see the path that I and other artists took as a living work of art.

Robert Cloutier, artist

AUTHOR • JEFF NACHTIGALL

Jeff is an established artist whose work has been exhibited in North America, Europe, and China. He also is a facilitator, speaker, and social entrepreneur who has led dozens of residencies and workshops, lectured in communities across Canada and the United States, and has given keynote addresses at national conferences on the arts and aging.

In 2007, Jeff developed Open Studio Projects (www.openstudioprojects.com), a model that he has successfully replicated throughout Canada and the United States. This inclusive, non-hierarchical, community-centered strategy challenges traditional clinical approaches and pushes the boundaries of the arts in healthcare. This model has evolved and grown into a community-based practice, which engages marginalized groups across North America in art interventions that act as a catalyst for social change. Jeff is also the designer and inventor of the Mobile Painting Device

(MPD). The MPD transforms the wheelchair into a giant paintbrush, giving people who live with neurological deficits the opportunity to express themselves on a very large scale.

Twice shortlisted for the Lieutenant Governor's Award in Arts and Learning, Jeff consults with communities and organizations across Canada, Australia, and the United States.

(All images provided courtesy of Jeff Nachtigall.)

