

A seascape by Emmanuel Martinez is among the 200 paintings he has completed in the past 15 years.



Photo by Ralph Mayer.

A Second Chance: Injured Worker's Art Enriches His Life While Inspiring Others

By Nick Crews

Artists each recall a moment when inspiration first touched them.

For Emmanuel Martinez, inspiration came in an unlikely setting: a room crowded with medical equipment at Doctors Hospital in Augusta, Georgia 15 years ago.



Emmanuel Martinez overcame tremendous personal challenges following an injury to become a fine artist.

Photo by Ralph Mayer.

Martinez, who had occupied the room for many months, had faced and overcome significant personal challenges since earlier that year when a crane hoisting a pipe he was installing at a Greenville, South Carolina construction site contacted high-voltage lines, resulting in a severe electrical shock injury.

The injury resulted in the amputation of his dominant arm, both legs and his entire lower body from the navel down. He also lost a finger on his remaining left hand. The injury also required repeated plastic surgeries for electrical burns, and other procedures.

After it all, Martinez awoke from an extended drug-induced coma to find himself in a condition that for most would hardly be conducive to inspiration.

And yet, inspiration is what touched him as a recreational therapist at his bedside told him about a woman who had been paralyzed from the neck down who nevertheless had learned to paint.

"Up to that time, I had never painted or drawn anything with my left hand," recalled Martinez.

"I'd only drawn simple cartoons when I was a child. At the hospital the therapist showed me a biography about a woman who had learned to paint holding the paintbrush in her mouth. I thought if she can paint with her mouth, I can learn to paint with my non-dominant arm. The woman inspired me."

Amid the challenges finding hope and inspiration.

Those who know Martinez say one of his great gifts is finding hope where others see only darkness and inspiration where most would find only despair.

Martinez was inspired that day by the realization that another had overcome challenges even more daunting than his own to find creative expression in art. It was a moment that he credits with changing his life for the better at a time when so much had changed for the worse.

The hospital staff began encouraging his fledgling artistic efforts by bringing him art supplies. They were amazed at his progress. He began taking art lessons soon after being discharged. He continued to paint with ever-more impressive results.

Today Martinez points to 200 completed paintings over the past 15 years as proof that art and self-expression can flourish in the face of the incredible challenges that follow a cataclysmic injury.

In his case, the injury has physically confined him to a bed or a wheelchair, but spiritually and artistically it has not confined him at all.

"My painting has become a part of my life," says Martinez. "If the accident hadn't happened, I would not have known I had the skill to paint. There is always something good that comes of something bad."



Photo by Ralph Mayer.

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An unforeseen challenge.

A few months after his release, Martinez endured another major challenge, this one completely unexpected. Legion Insurance Company, the carrier of his workers’ compensation claim, went into liquidation.

Within days, Martinez’s caseworker and other insurance-provided support vanished even as he struggled to transition to life outside the hospital.

He languished in the limbo that followed, but things began looking up when his file was turned over to the South Carolina Property & Casualty Insurance Guaranty Association (SCPCIGA), which stepped in to begin covering claims for the failed insurer.

Today, SCPCIGA provides Martinez with his disability payments. The guaranty association also covers all medical expenses stemming from his injury and all medical and nursing costs. It has provided a handicapped accessible van and home, medicines, prosthetic devices, home care services, hospital stays and treatment of his injuries—all of this for the rest of his life.

If the arrival of SCPCIGA seemed like a gift from heaven, for Martinez the real angel-in-waiting was Cynthia Grimley, his new case manager.

“Cynthia helps me with everything,” says Martinez. “She is like family and is like an angel sent to me. I know I can call her anytime day or night.”

Grimley recalls those challenging days following the liquidation.

“When Emmanuel got out of the hospital there was another case manager working with him, but everything stopped when Legion Insurance went into liquidation,” she says.

Grimley, a Certified Rehabilitation Counselor and Certified Case Manager, quickly took stock of the situation.

“He had no case manager helping him for a good while. There were things that were not happening for him. For instance, a special bathtub had been ordered by his treating physician, but it was sitting in a back room uninstalled because there was no place to install it in his house.”

Martinez is quick to add that his artistic achievements weren’t easily won. After some early art therapy sessions at the hospital, he began the hard work of learning to draw with his left hand.

“My sister Cecilia came to the hospital with paper and pencils to help me as part of my rehabilitation,” he says.

“She would sometimes hold my hand steady because it would shake. I had to learn to write the alphabet and numbers with my left hand before I could do anything else. I would get frustrated because I could not hold the pencil correctly because I was missing my left index finger from the accident. Plus, I was training my non-dominant hand. I remember slamming the pencil into the paper in frustration – many times.”

By the time he was released from the hospital in 2001, Martinez had overcome his initial frustration to earn slow, but constant, improvements in his drawing and painting as he transitioned to a home setting.

At home Martinez needed 24-hour-a-day attendant care and regular treatment from qualified nursing staff, therapists, physicians and other medical professionals. He also required help in transferring himself between his bed and his wheelchair, as well as with food preparation, bathing, hygiene and other daily necessities.



"You know, this man is totally amazing."

Grimley began working with SCPCIGA on Martinez's behalf. She says the organization showed flexibility and creativity in addressing Martinez's many needs.

"Emmanuel's needs were so great that the house where he was living was going to require a lot of modifications, so the guaranty fund ended up building a custom home for him," she says.

"The customized home was a more cost-effective way of doing things because his family was able to take care of him. He was able to stay at home, and he was getting better care. It would have been cost-prohibitive to have him institutionalized in a nursing home," Grimley said, adding that the home-based option greatly improved Martinez's quality of life.

"The most incredible thing..."

While Grimley assisted Martinez with the practical matters related to his new home and treatment, she also picked up where the hospital staff had left off in encouraging him to paint.

"When I went to his first rental house he had a whole room that was an art studio," says Grimley. "He showed me some of his work, and I was just amazed. He had started to take art lessons. As soon as I met him I saw he had this talent."

Following that first meeting Martinez's story touched Grimley deeply.

"I got on the interstate and drove back to South Carolina. I had tears in my eyes because I thought, 'You know, this man is totally amazing; I have no problems in the world compared to what he's got – yet he never complains.' It was the most incredible thing," she recalled.

When Martinez's sister Cecilia was diagnosed with cancer, he urged her to join him in painting as a way to work through her illness.

"For a while Emmanuel didn't paint, but then he got back into it, and he got his sister involved when she got sick," says Grimley. "He recognized how painting had helped him with his rehab. Now he was using that with her."

"I inspired my sister Cecilia to paint when she was ill," Martinez said. "We went to art classes together. We often would paint together at home before she passed away. Her paintings will

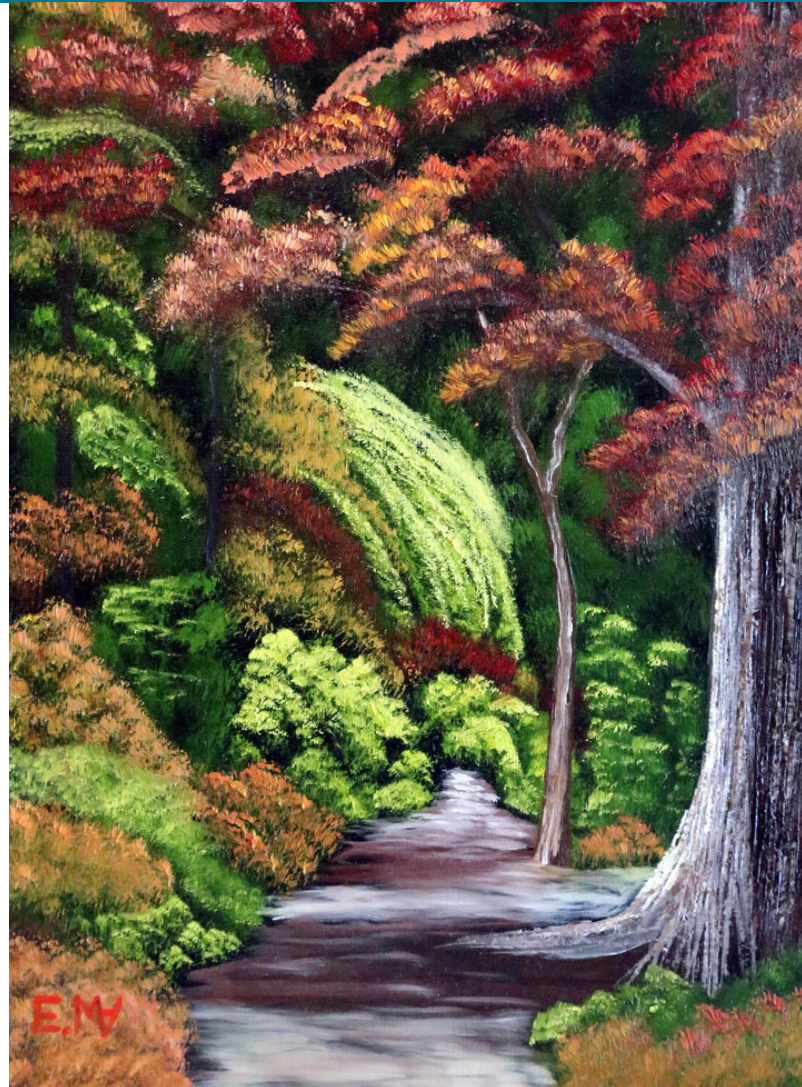


Photo by Ralph Mayer.

be something her children will always have to treasure."

Martinez continued to improve his painting skills as he began taking classes, working long hours on refining techniques learned in lessons or on YouTube videos.

"He paints in bed for the most part," says Grimley. "Sometimes he gets up and sits in his bucket seat in the wheel chair, and he'll paint with the canvas on an easel. But he often paints in bed. His bed actually has an elevated headrest. He has an over-the-bed table and the easel is secured and the canvas sits there. Painting from bed is better for him because he can look things up on the computer and watch lessons and learn new techniques."

Preparing for an exhibit.

Meanwhile, the number of Martinez's still life and landscape paintings has continued to grow. In addition to donating about 20 paintings to Doctors Hospital, where they are permanently displayed, Martinez began preparing for an exhibit of his paintings. It was held last year.

At the exhibit, Martinez sold 20 paintings. He donated the proceeds of the sales to the Lydia Project, an Augusta, Georgia-based charity that provides free services to women with cancer. Martinez's sister Cecilia used the services extensively before she passed away in 2014.

Martinez says he now has friends who came to art class with him because they wanted to learn how to paint as well as he does.

Grimley says that her appreciation of Martinez's art has grown through the nearly 12 years she's worked with him.

"His art is amazing; I'm in awe of it. Every time he finishes a painting he takes a photo and sends it to me. They're all very different and they're all very beautiful. It's remarkable. Something like that can't be put into words about how he has overcome the obstacles he has had to face to produce artwork like this."

Martinez's art continues to garner him attention and accolades. The SCPCIGA recently nominated him for the first annual Inspirational Award from the South Carolina Workers' Compensation Educational Association.

In addition, the guaranty fund is developing a website for Martinez that will take his artwork and inspiring message worldwide. The website – emmanuelmartinezart.info – is scheduled to launch later this summer.

"I'm excited about the website because it will share my story and artwork," says Martinez. "The world will now get to learn about me, and I will have the chance to inspire more people. Now others will get to know about me and what I have gone through, and know that I never gave up. They also can see what I am doing with my life, and the miracle that God provided for me."

Martinez credits the guaranty fund with helping make his life better and success possible.



Photo by Ralph Mayer.

"[The SCPCIGA] has helped me a lot. They bought the handicapped accessible house where I live now. In addition to my check, which they send, they have provided me with all my needs, from a power wheelchair, to a manual wheelchair, all medications, medical supplies, physicians and a handicapped-accessible mini-van. Also, my family members are paid to be my caregivers."

Smitty Harrison, Executive Director of the South Carolina Property & Casualty Insurance Guaranty Association, says Martinez's story is a reminder of the human benefits delivered by guaranty fund system.

"When an insurance company goes insolvent, it is easy to focus on claim numbers, files, and types of injuries. Emmanuel's story reminds us that this is a 'people business.' Claimants rely on us to receive their benefits," says Harrison.

"It is rewarding to us to see our efforts pay off by improving the quality of life for an injured worker. This is especially true for a person such as Emmanuel, who has taught us that no problem or obstacle is too great."

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*Smitty Harrison, Executive Director
of the South Carolina Property & Casualty
Insurance Guaranty Association*

Finding a life’s purpose in art.

For Grimley, Martinez, now 35, is evidence of how personal challenges that would be insurmountable to some can lead others to a new-found dignity and purpose in life and a deep spirituality.

“Once when I took Emmanuel to a medical appointment, the doctor asked him, ‘How did you find such a good friend?’ (the friend being me.) Emmanuel pointed up and said, ‘God sent her to me.’”

The esteem in which Martinez holds Grimley is mutual, she says.

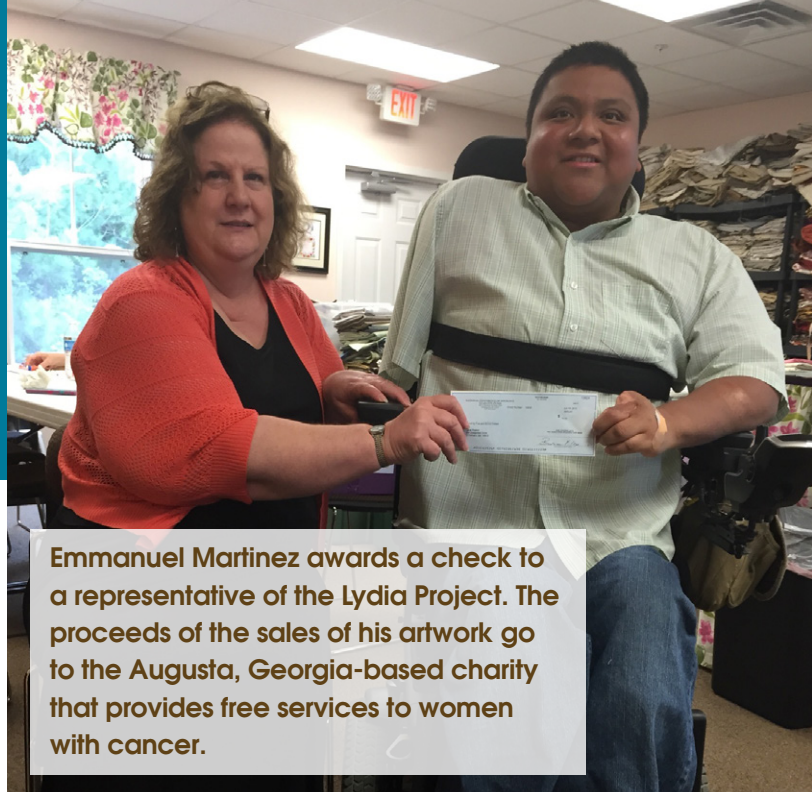
“Sometimes people come into our lives and touch us in a special way that we will never forget,” says Grimley. “Emmanuel has done this for me. However, he does this to everyone who meets him. I’ve witnessed that over and over.”

Dean Beasley, Administrative Director of the Doctors Hospital Physical Rehabilitation Center in Augusta, Georgia underscores just how far Martinez has come since his injury.

“I have been with Emmanuel since day one,” he said. “He was not expected to survive this catastrophic injury, but with the help of skilled physicians, nursing and therapy staff and consistent case management he is with us 15 years later. The medical personnel made this possible, but more importantly it was his determination to overcome the barriers he faced and his strong faith that has made this possible.

“Emmanuel inspires everyone he meets. He emanates such positive energy and his artwork is only a visual demonstration of this energy. Here at Doctors Hospital we have a wall dedicated to him with a photograph of Emmanuel and some of his framed artwork. He has become the ‘unofficial mascot’ of the Rehabilitation Center.”

When he is not painting, Martinez finds time to attend church, flea markets, catch the latest movies and visit the beach with his family. Frequent trips to the nature trail behind his house



Emmanuel Martinez awards a check to a representative of the Lydia Project. The proceeds of the sales of his artwork go to the Augusta, Georgia-based charity that provides free services to women with cancer.

connect him to the great outdoors, which, in turn, inspires his art – especially the landscapes he loves to paint.

“I feel very fortunate to have met Emmanuel,” says Grimley. “I’ve worked with a lot of great people, but Emmanuel is a highlight of my career. Meeting him and working with him has given me a lot of gratitude. I don’t know many people who would accept living like Emmanuel. I don’t know many who would have accepted things the way he has, and accomplished so much. He views his situation as: ‘I’ve been given a second chance.’”

Martinez says his art, in addition to being a source of personal inspiration and satisfaction, has also inspired others. This he sees as perhaps its greatest value.

“I did not know I had a talent for painting until after my accident,” says Martinez. “Now, when I look at the white piece of canvas and see what I created, I sometimes say, ‘Wow! Look at that!’”

Editor’s note: All proceeds from Emmanuel Martinez art sales go to support the Lydia Project. To learn more about the Lydia Project, visit <http://www.thelydiaproject.org/>

Another exhibit of his art work is planned for 2015.

Emmanuel gratefully accepts donations of painting supplies. Supplies can be sent to him at Emmanuel Martinez, c/o Cynthia P. Grimley, 100 Old Cherokee Road, Suite F-226, Lexington, SC 29072

Emmanuel’s website will launch later this summer. View it at www.emmanuelmartinezart.info