



THE ART OF INSPIRATION

A BIZARRE ACCIDENT SPARKS AN INCREDIBLE
TALENT AND OFFERS UP A LESSON ON
HOW LIFE SHOULD BE LIVED

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY GLENN V. OSTLE



After a skiing accident left him paralyzed from the neck down, Marcus Thomas took up painting, using a paintbrush attached to a white plastic tube that he holds between his teeth.

I met Marcus Thomas at an art festival in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. More accurately, I first met his wife, Anne, and with an offhand comment managed to stick my foot so far into my mouth that I almost needed a surgeon to remove it.

As I prepared my exhibit area early that morning, I struck up a brief conversation with one of two women setting up nearby. Teasingly I said, “So, your husband slept in and left you to do all the work, right?” She smiled and said that he would be along shortly, and then hinted that I’d understand a little more at that time.

Boy, did I ever.

Just before the festival opened, I looked up and saw an amazing sight. Firmly strapped into a high-tech black wheelchair, a man was wheeling down the small path toward the fairgrounds, steering with only a small rubber tube that he held between his teeth. Crowds of people parted to make way for him, and as he passed, friends and fellow artists greeted him by name.

He rolled up in front of the tents and positioned himself before an easel that Anne and the other woman—who turned out to be his sister, Amanda—had set up earlier. Anne picked up a paintbrush attached to a long, thin, white plastic tube and placed it in his mouth. Then using only his neck muscles, the wheelchair-bound rider began to deftly apply delicate strokes to a painting of four white ibises, to the absolute astonishment of people standing nearby. Marcus Thomas had arrived, and as he worked, scrutinizing each stroke of bristle on canvas through intense blue eyes, Anne turned to me and smiled. I felt smaller than the ants beneath our feet.

I spent the rest of that day distracted from the business of selling photos and stealing glimpses of this incredibly talented man for whom awe was too inadequate a word. As the day progressed, a number of festival-goers left Marcus’s tent clutching large original paintings for which they’d paid thousands of dollars. Judging by the satisfied expression on their faces, they had acquired more than just a beautiful painting. They also carried with them the experience of meeting a remarkable man and creator of the artwork that they now owned.

A LESSON ON LIVING

The story of Marcus Thomas reads like a parable that Sunday school teachers recite as proof of heaven's plan or as a character lesson to be taken to heart: Star athlete, just graduated from college, is paralyzed from the neck down in a freak accident. While things seem bleak, he remains positive and overcomes his circumstances through sheer force of character, and in doing so discovers a tremendous talent that he never knew he possessed. But Marcus's story is all the more awe inspiring because it is true, and because it serves as a real-life lesson every day.

As a child, Marcus was a natural athlete with a thirst for adventure. In high school, he was a star basketball point guard and local heartthrob. "He was awesome to grow up with," recalls Amanda. "We came from a very close family, and Marcus and I had similar personalities. He taught me to play basketball and to ski. In school he was popular and good at everything. My girlfriends used to invite me to go with them to the pool, just to get closer to him. He has always been a positive and funny person, always busy, and he is the same today."



Marcus draws on nature for inspiration, a fact evident in works like *American Redstart* (above) and *Red-shouldered Hawk* (below).

By the time Marcus entered Mars Hill College near Asheville, North Carolina, he and Anne had developed a close relationship and spent much of their time outdoors, skiing, hiking, and mountain biking. In 1985, Marcus graduated with a degree in commercial recreation with the goal of becoming an activities director at a resort. Three months later, on March 3, 1986, those plans came to a crashing halt on the slopes of Beech Mountain in North Carolina. While skiing, Marcus fell and slid head first into the base of a tree, breaking his neck at the fourth cervical vertebrae and leaving him completely and permanently paralyzed from the shoulders down.

According to Anne, who has been with him for twenty-three years and his wife for the past eleven years, Marcus was resuscitated three times before he arrived at Charles A. Cannon, Jr. Memorial Hospital in Banner Elk, North Carolina. From there he was rushed to Johnson City Medical Center in Tennessee, where he spent three months in intensive care. Eight weeks passed before he regained consciousness. "If it wasn't for the extremely talented ski patrol at Beech Mountain and the incredible doctors at Johnson City Medical Center, Marcus wouldn't be alive today," says Anne thankfully.

To determine the extent of Marcus's paralysis, doctors had to wait for the swelling in his head to go down, as it was pressing against his spine. After three months, Marcus was flown to the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he began his rehabilitation. Two months later, Marcus had made enough progress to be moved to the Woodrow Wilson Rehabilitation Center in Fishersville, Virginia, where he received the wheelchair in which he would spend the rest of his life and Anne learned the basics of caring for him.

"I have taken care of him since the day of the accident," says Anne. "At the hospital I learned how to lift him in and out of the chair. To this day we don't have any help because we are on the move so much. We can't really ask people to work two hours one day and three the next. No one wants to work that way."

While such a tragedy would probably have broken the spirit of a weaker couple, it didn't make a dent in the relationship between Marcus and Anne or in their approach to life in general. When asked if it wasn't at least somewhat devastating, Anne laughs and says, "I know you want to write that. All writers do. But it really wasn't that way. From that day we've just gone forward and have



Marcus and his wife, Anne, spend much of the year traveling throughout the country, and Marcus says landscapes such as *Flat Creek* (above) and *California Church* (below) “are like a visual diary of my travels and favorite settings.”

done what we’ve needed to do. I really can’t remember a time when I thought, ‘Oh my God, our life is over.’ We just haven’t had time to think much about it. We refer to March 3, 1986, as Marcus’s ‘re-birthday,’ which basically makes him only twenty-one years old!”

UNCOVERING A NATURAL TALENT

As Anne and Marcus looked for ways for Marcus to excel, they found one almost by accident. In 1986, Anne and Amanda gave Marcus a set of Crayola watercolors for Christmas, and in doing so touched a talent deep within Marcus that he today uses to satisfy himself and please others.

“[The accident] really hit Mom and Dad hard as well as our grandparents,” says Marcus’s sister, Amanda. “They were really saddened by it. But when Marcus started painting, it put a different light on things.”

“I had never done any painting before,” says Marcus. “I had always appreciated art, but it never occurred to me that I could do it. But when Anne gave me the paints I said, ‘Let’s go.’ It was time for a new activity. Reading, watching TV, and working on the computer were getting old. I had already learned to type and write with a mouth stick, so I figured, ‘Why not try painting?’ ”

When Marcus discovered his artistic talent, did Anne ever feel that the accident might have been a strange sort of blessing? “Absolutely not,” she says. “I thought, ‘This sucks. Too bad it had to happen, but it is just the way it is.’ I don’t think it is a blessing just because he paints. The real blessing is that he loves to do it.”

On a productive day, Marcus paints for six to eight hours, during which time he uses watercolors or oils—depending on the tones or textures that he wants—and different lengths and thicknesses of brushes mounted on lightweight sticks that he holds between his teeth. But he freely admits that he



“THE POWER AND FREENESS OF THE NATURAL WORLD HAS ALWAYS INTRIGUED ME. MY GOAL IS TO REALISTICALLY SECURE THAT STRENGTH AND FREEDOM WITH THE STROKES OF MY PAINTBRUSH.”

—MARCUS THOMAS





Marcus enjoys bird-watching and captures what he sees in works such as *Restless Splendor* (above), *Great Blue Heron* (below), and *Black-throated Blue Warbler* (opposite bottom).

is often distracted by watching major televised sporting events such as golf, tennis, or baseball.

The amount of time it takes him to complete a painting depends on the final size. A large scene, up to thirty inches square, could require several months, while a small painting takes only a couple of weeks. He normally has four or more projects in progress at one time.

Anne handles all of the framing, working with a local company. She chooses the mat colors and frames that she feels most complement the different scenes. Because of his slow painting style and desire to reach a broad audience, Marcus makes high quality reproductions of some of his paintings. "Currently, I complete about ten scenes a year," he says. "Of those, only two or three will be printed."

When asked about his favorite picture, Marcus says it is the one that he has yet to paint. His prime motivator is always his next big project, and for inspiration Marcus continually returns to his lifelong love of the outdoors. "The power and freeness of the natural world has always intrigued me," he says. "My goal is to realistically secure that strength and freedom with the strokes of my paintbrush.

"My landscapes are like a visual diary of my travels and favorite settings, ranging from Southwest Florida to the central eastern United States to New England and Northern California," he continues. "I enjoy painting aging structures, as they seem to radiate history that can hopefully be reconstructed and preserved through my painting. My painting also lets me remain active outdoors, visually absorbing all that nature provides. It is also something that Anne and I can share. Without her love



ALL ARTWORK IMAGES COURTESY OF MARCUS THOMAS

and tireless enthusiasm, the artistic pursuits and happiness that I cherish would not be possible. Having been together for so many years, we have battled to find direction in our bizarre, difficult, and sometimes chaotic life.”

Recently, Marcus’s story was the subject of a television documentary by Michael Cogdill and John Hendon from WYFF in Greenville, North Carolina, which won a coveted Edward R. Murrow Award. “Oprah hasn’t called yet, but we are still waiting,” laughs Marcus.

IN SEARCH OF SUNSHINE

Though Marcus and Anne are based in Weaverville, just outside of Asheville in the hills of western North Carolina, they spend much of the winter in Florida, participating in art festivals and keeping warm. Marcus’s accident damaged his body’s thermoregulator, so he tends to take on the temperature of the air around him. According to Anne, “The Florida warmth from January through April allows Marcus to be more productive and also participate in some incredible bird-watching.”

While in Florida, Marcus spends much of his time at the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge on Sanibel Island, watching and being inspired by the bird life that thrives there. Often the local guides will set up their spotting scopes so that he can get a closer look. But while birds remain high on his list of favorite subjects, Marcus has lately become fascinated with painting orchids.

While it is easy to focus on Marcus’s tragic accident and the irony of how it led to the discovery of his painting talent, both he and Anne are quick to point out that the real story is much more than that. Art is just the method he found to continue to express himself. The real lesson of Marcus Thomas’s life is about constantly looking for what it is that completes you, and never giving up no matter what obstacles life puts in your way.

If for some reason Marcus awoke tomorrow and could never paint another stroke, I know he would only smile up at Anne and together the two would simply look for another way to find satisfaction and happiness. Marcus was lucky. He had his family, his art, and he had Anne.

“Some people can be real bears when they are injured—bitter and angry—which makes them difficult to take care of,” says Anne. “I am fortunate in that Marcus goes to bed every night with a smile on his face and wakes up with a smile every morning. We both feel very fortunate that he has been given a second chance.” 🙏

For more information about Marcus Thomas and his artwork, visit www.marcusthomas.com.

Glenn V. Ostle is a Charlotte, North Carolina-based freelance photojournalist, the department editor of Times of the Islands, and one of Marcus and Anne Thomas’s biggest fans. His articles and photos have appeared in a number of dive and travel magazines and can be viewed at www.featherandfins.com.



Marcus with his sister, Amanda (left), and wife, Anne (right).

www.MarcusThomas.com

