

## WINNING STRATEGIES

PUBLICATION: *Daily Record* (Parsippany, NJ)

READERSHIP: Daily (177,086)

DATE: Saturday, June 17, 2006

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### **Wharton man masters art of overcoming adversities After battling seizures, brain tumor, he debuts exhibit about struggle**

BY JAKE REMALY  
DAILY RECORD



Jason Towns knows what it is to struggle.

The Wharton man battled through a brain tumor at 14, a coma at 19 and seizures at 25.

Drawing on those struggles, Towns put together an exhibit called "Struggles of Mankind" that will open on Tuesday at the Montclair Art Museum.

Towns said he wants those viewing the exhibit to "get an idea of what people have to deal with -- get the feeling that they can rise over whatever has come from their life."

In his first attempt at curating, the 31-year-old Towns put the exhibit together from paintings in the museum's permanent collection.

"Altogether it's pieced like a story," he said. "It's showing how people have gone through (struggles) and still have the spirit to rise above everything."

Towns has done his own share of rising above setbacks.

Doctors removed a tumor from his brain when he was 14, leaving the right-handed aspiring artist paralyzed in his right arm.

At 19, his head crashed into a car windshield during an automobile accident. He was in a coma for two days after the wreck

While majoring in fine arts as a 25-year-old senior at Montclair State University, he began having seizures in the apartment where he lived on his own. The seizures forced him to leave college 18 credits shy of graduating. He had to move in with his mom.

In March 2002, Towns became involved with Opportunity Project, a national organization with a location in Millburn that supports adults with brain injuries. In August of that year, Arlene Lieberman, a vocational counselor at Opportunity Project, connected him with the museum.

"He knew that he wanted to stay in art," Lieberman said, noting that the only time his face would light up was when he talked about art.

Towns began curating at the suggestion of Gary Schneider, the museum's director of education, who has supervised Towns' volunteer work at the museum for the past three years.

Towns and Schneider had extensive e-mail correspondence and met every Wednesday at the museum to work on the exhibit, Towns said.

"There were things we disagreed on," Schneider said, "but he had the final say."

Towns went through two books of more than 1,000 pieces from the museum's collection and narrowed them down to 25, and then chose 12 for the final exhibit.

"I picked out paintings that showed struggle," Towns said. "I thought that other people would also feel the struggling."

After selecting the paintings and identifying the theme, he decided how to use the space in the exhibit room, how to group and order the works, which colors worked together and what frames should be used. He also wrote a guide that explains each painting's inclusion in the exhibit.

"It's been more work than I thought," he said.

The paintings are organized by four themes: "Man's Battle with Nature," "Man's Turmoil with Internal Emotions," "Social and Political Struggles," and "Man's Enduring Spirit."

A reproduction of "Snowbound," an oil on canvas by John Twachtman depicting a lone cabin in the woods covered with snow, is part of the exhibit. The painting is beautiful, but it also shows humanity's struggle with nature, Towns said.

"It's got snow all over the place. It's suffocating -- it's really suffocating if you look at it," he said. "Some of the times you can feel like that."

Schneider had never looked at the painting that way.

"I thought it was an incredibly poetic way of describing a blizzard," Schneider said. "He opened up a whole other way of looking at these paintings for me."

Towns' struggle with brain injury and the resulting insecurity were at times overwhelming.

"There's times in your life when it seems like there's too much ... so depressing there's no way out," Towns said.

Curating is one manifestation of Towns' spirit rising to overcome his personal struggles, he said.

"It's helped me express what I felt," Towns said. "It shows what I've been through. I'm also trying to show that other people go through this, too."

"I think I've seen his confidence grow over the past six months," Schneider said.

"Young Storm Dragon," an abstract painting by Stanton Macdonald-Wright, was selected for the exhibit and shows the enduring spirit exactly, Towns said. The abstraction, along with its light colors, "really gives it life," he said.

Towns also is beginning to draw again and is finishing his coursework at Montclair State.

"I used to draw all the time," he said. He stopped when he lost use of his right arm, then learned to draw with his left hand and found that his talent was still there. He stopped again when he began having seizures.

"I'm just starting to draw (again) now," he said. "I know my drawings are going to be different."

Towns also is returning to work on his bachelor's degree. He took two classes in the fall at County College of Morris and will take his last 12 credits at Montclair State in September.

Prior to curating, Towns researched exhibits of Native American art and works from the Vaudeville Era and gave tours to groups from Opportunity Project. Towns said the groups will be at the reception.

The exhibit will be on view in a lobby on the third floor of the museum on Tuesdays through Fridays until Sept. 17.

**BOB KARP / DAILY RECORD**

Jason Towns' art exhibit shows 'how people have gone through (struggles) and still have the spirit to rise above everything.'

**If you go**

A reception celebrating the opening of "Struggles of Mankind" will be held at the Montclair Art Museum from 7 to 9 p.m. on Tuesday. For directions or more information, visit [www.montclairartmuseum.org](http://www.montclairartmuseum.org) or call (973) 746-5555.

For information about Opportunity Project and how you can help, visit [www.opportunityproject.org](http://www.opportunityproject.org) or call (973) 921-1000.