

How Inclusion Body Myositis and Watercolor Painting Changed My Life

By Mike Shirk, NWWWS



Before I was diagnosed with inclusion body myositis, my favorite activities were golf, tennis, hiking and fishing. I was earning a living as an advertising copywriter and was looking forward to retirement when I would write the great American novel in between rounds of golf, tennis matches, hikes in the mountains and fishing trips. But then came the weakness and the falls and, with the diagnosis, came the realization that the retirement I had scripted for myself was in serious need of a rewrite.



Guarding the Coast

For nearly four years I tried to fight the inevitable. I continued to work. I even tried to continue playing golf and tennis. But when the golf club kept flying out of my hands at the driving range, and after I fell and almost knocked myself out on the tennis court, I realized those leisure time activities were over. My fingers became weaker and this interfered with my writing since I had always been a fast typist and had specialized in long technical brochures that were now beyond my endurance.



To the Point #5

So I retired on disability and spent most of the next year riding around the neighborhood on my scooter, sitting at the computer surfing the Internet, and watching a lot of television. For the first time in my life I had no deadlines to meet, no appointments to keep, no clients to please. That was the good news, but it was also the bad news. I soon realized that I needed a challenge, so I took up watercolor painting.

Why would someone who had spent a lifetime writing take up art? Mainly because it was something I had never done before, even though my wife is an experienced artist. To be honest I thought it would be a temporary endeavor, that after a year or two I would have mastered it and could move on to the next challenge. I was certainly wrong about that. The great thing about watercolor is that it can never be truly mastered. You'll have good days and bad days, feel triumphant and feel discouraged - sounds like golf doesn't it? - but this is what keeps me going. Each day I start with a blank piece of watercolor paper and the knowledge that if I can stay in the right frame of mind and make good choices of colors and placement of shapes, by day's end I can have a work of art that I am proud of. Even if things don't go well I have something to analyze and prepare to do it better the next time.



Distant Memories

I'm no psychologist, but I believe that there is a lot of psychic sustenance to be gained from such a perpetual challenge. Better still, a creative activity is done best when you are in a very relaxed state of mind. You need to be in that place athletes call "the zone", where conscious thoughts seem to drift away and you are completely absorbed in the activity of the moment. In such a state, it is almost impossible to be discouraged about an illness or to even be aware of your weakness or aches and pains. So the creative arts offer not just a diversion but the opportunity for complete immersion in the task at hand. I know that for me this

is a very pleasant place to be and I highly recommend it to everyone.



*Rancho Bernardo
Evening*

About the Artist(s)

Mike Shirk, NWS, is a Past President and Life Member of the San Diego Watercolor Society. More than 100 of his paintings have been accepted in juried watercolor exhibitions, including Watercolor West, Northwest Watercolor Society, Western Federation Exhibition and the International Exhibition of SDWS. His paintings have received dozens of awards and been purchased by private collectors throughout the country. Point Piños Light, (see image below) was accepted into the Permanent Art Collection of the Muscular Dystrophy Association and hangs in their headquarters in Tucson, Arizona.

His wife, Beth Shirk, is also a disabled artist, having recently been diagnosed with Myotonic Muscular Dystrophy. Her work has appeared twice in the SDWS International Exhibition and has been recognized in numerous other juried exhibitions.



Point Piños Light
by Mike Shirk



Burgundy Rhapsody
by Beth Shirk