

Inspiration through Art

By: Kristen Williams

If you have a chronic illness, you know how easily you can become depressed and lose hope completely. At my lowest of lows, I was chained to my house with my ulcerative colitis. I would cry at night and pray that I would wake up the next morning and it had all been a nightmare. Over the years, I've realized that being a gifted artist and being able to work from home has been my savior in all of this, leading me to the best friends and community in the world.

When I was forced to leave my full time job as an art director in 2012, I was completely defeated. My disease had officially taken control of my life, taking my independence from me, as well as my income. I slowly began to pick myself up, and I began painting again. Art has always been the most amazing form of therapy for me. I'll forget how I'm feeling and am able to create something beautiful. It's the one thing that my disease has never been able to take from me--my talent. As I continued to paint on canvas, I realized that I could bring my graphic design work to my home. I began reaching out to the community for freelance opportunities, and as I acquired more and more work, I was able to start working on my own time from my home, not living in constant fear of losing my job.

When medications completely stopped controlling my UC, I was on the verge of giving up completely again. I made the decision to travel across the country to the Cleveland Clinic and have my colon removed--a series of surgeries that would put me on a surgical roller coaster ride for a year. It was around this time that I had reached out via social media to someone who is now one of my most amazing friends, Brooke. She was in the middle of the same series of surgeries at the Cleveland Clinic, and she helped me mentally prepare for the battle more than she will ever know. Out of the blue, Brooke told me about an idea she had: to start an online magazine for people suffering with IBD. Upon diagnosis at age 18 in 2007, I had never heard of the disease. And even when I officially had a name for my symptoms, it meant nothing. I had no idea what it meant. I had no resources. I had no one to talk to. I welcomed Brooke's idea with open arms, and Companion Magazine was born. In between surgeries, I would work on designing each issue, reading everyone's inspiring stories and helpful advice along the way.

From there, I was introduced to the IBD community on social media, meeting the most amazing, strong people I have ever known. Having people tell me that the magazine made the biggest difference in their lives, giving them hope for a future, is without a doubt the most fulfilling feeling in the world. I would have given anything upon diagnosis for the friends and resources I have today.

As I battled through the surgeries, dealing with open surgeries and a temporary ileostomy, I ironically felt as if I suddenly had a future, even on my hardest days. Looking back on all of this

now, I see what my talent led me to: hope. Because of my freelance work, I was able to design a magazine that reaches out to people all over the world. Because of this magazine, I'm able to give people a glimmer of hope to hold on to, and most importantly, let them know they're not alone. I am SO thankful to be an artist. I'm able to reach out to people in a way that not everyone can do. Because of that, being an artist has made me so much stronger than I ever thought I could be.

I currently work from my new home (and new studio!) with my puppy, working with clients all over the country. In the early evenings, I leave the computer and work in oil, acrylics, and watercolor, pushing myself to explore new things. At the moment, I have too many dog portraits lined up to count, and I'm incredibly thankful. Every few months, Brooke and I get another issue of Companion Magazine together.

I'm healthy again, and I'll never take it for granted. It has given me a new lease on life, and I'll continue creating in the hope that I'll help just one more person.

